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Hutchinson's

Story Magazine

No. 3 SEPTEMBER



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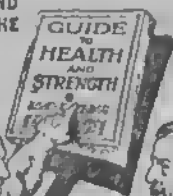
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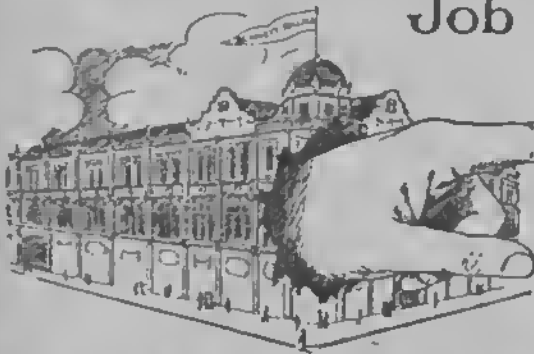
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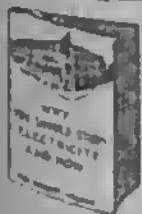
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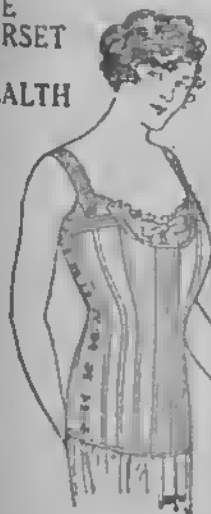
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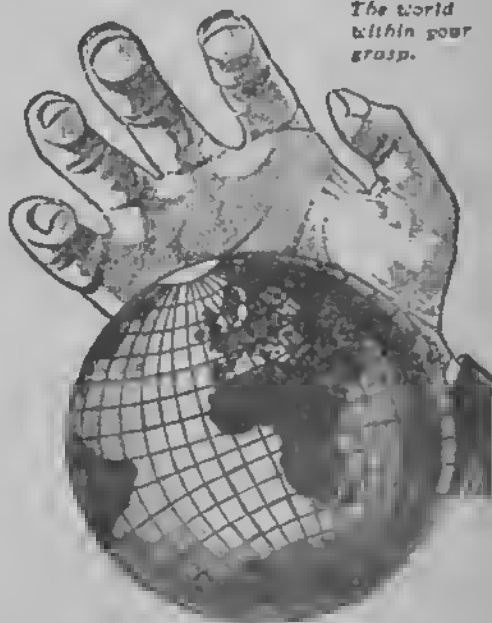
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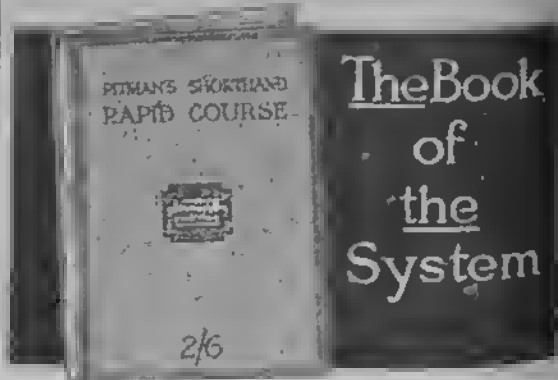
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I

IT had been a hot day at the Law Courts, but a faint breeze had sprung up with the later hours, blowing softly over the river. It caught the tassel of the blind by which Field sat and tapped it against the window-frame, at first gently like a child at play, then with gathering force and insistence till at last he looked up with a frown and rose to fasten it back.

It was growing late. The rose of the afterglow lay upon the water, tipping the silvery ripples with soft colour. It was a magic night. But the wonder of it did not apparently reach him. A table littered with papers stood in front of him bearing a portable electric lamp. He was obviously too engrossed to think of exterior things.

For a space he sat again in silence by the open window, only the faint rustling of the lace curtain being audible. His somewhat hard, clean-shaven face was

bent over his work with rigid concentration. His eyelids scarcely stirred.

Then again there came a tapping, this time at the door. The frown returned to his face. He looked up.

"Well?"

The door opened. A small, sharp-faced boy poked in his head. "A lady to see you, sir."

"What?" said Field. His frown deepened. "I can't see any one. I told you so."

"Says she won't go away till she's seen you, sir," returned the boy glibly. "Can't get her to budge, sir."

"Oh, tell her——" said Field, and stopped as if arrested by a sudden thought. "Who is it?" he asked.

A grin so brief that it might have been a mere twitch of the features passed over the boy's face.

"Wouldn't give no name, sir. But she's a nob of some sort," he said. "Got a shiny satin dress on under her cloak."

Field's eyes went for a moment to his

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littered papers. Then he picked up a newspaper from a chair and threw it over them.

"Show her in!" he said briefly.

He got up with the words, and stood with his back to the window, watching the half-open door.

There came a slight rustle in the passage outside. The small boy reappeared and threw the door wide with a flourish. A woman in a dark cloak and hat with a thick veil over her face entered.

The door closed behind her. Field stood motionless. She advanced with slight hesitation.

"I hope you will forgive me," she said, "for intruding upon you."

Her voice was rich and deep. It held a throb of nervousness. Field came deliberately forward.

"I presume I can be of use to you," he said.

His tone was dry. There was scant encouragement about him as he drew forward a chair.

She hesitated momentarily before accepting it, but finally sat down with a gesture that seemed to indicate physical weakness of some sort.

"Yes, I want your help," she said.

Field said nothing. His face was the face of the trained man of law. It expressed naught beyond a steady, impersonal attention.

He drew up another chair and seated himself facing her.

She looked at him through her veil for several seconds in silence. Finally, with manifest effort, she spoke.

"It was so good of you to admit me—especially not knowing who I was. You recognise me now, of course? I am Lady Violet Calcott."

"I should recognise you more easily," he said in his emotionless voice, "if you would be good enough to put up your veil."

His tone was perfectly quiet and cour-

teous, yet she made a rapid movement to comply, as if he had definitely required it of her. She threw back the obscuring veil and showed him the face of one of the most beautiful women in London.

There was an instant's pause before he said.

"Yes, I recognise you, of course. And—you wanted to consult me?"

"No!" She leaned forward in her chair with white hands clasped. "I wanted to beg of you to tell me—why you have refused to undertake Burleigh Wentworth's defence!"

She spoke with a breathless intensity. Her wonderful eyes were lifted to his—eyes that had dazzled half London, but Field only looked down into them as he might have regarded one of his legal documents. A slight, peculiar smile just touched his lips as he made reply.

"I have no objection to telling you, Lady Violet. He is guilty. That is why."

"Ah!" It was a sound like the snapped string of an instrument. Her fingers gripped each other. "So you think that too! Indeed—indeed, you are wrong! But—is that your only reason?"

"Isn't it a sufficient one?" he said.

Her fingers writhed and strained against each other. "Do you mean that it is—against your principles?" she said.

"To defend a guilty man?" questioned the barrister slowly.

She nodded two or three times as if for the moment utterance were beyond her.

Field's eyes had not stirred from her face, yet still they had that legal look as if he searched for some hidden information.

"No," he said finally. "It is not entirely a matter of principle. As you are aware, I have achieved a certain reputation. And I value it."

She made a quick movement that was almost convulsive.

"But you would not injure your reputation. You would only enhance it," she said, speaking very rapidly as if some obstruction to speech had very suddenly been removed. "You are practically on the top of the wave. You would succeed where another man would fail. And indeed—oh, indeed he is innocent! He must be innocent! Things look black against him. But he can be saved somehow. And you could save him—if you would. Think what the awful disgrace would mean to him—if he were convicted! And he doesn't deserve it. I assure you he doesn't deserve it. Ah, how shall I persuade you of that?" Her voice quivered upon a note of despair. "Surely you are human! There must be some means of moving you. You can't want to see an innocent man go under!"

The beautiful eyes were blurred with tears as she looked at him. She caught back a piteous sob. The cloak had fallen from about her shoulders. They gleamed with an exquisite whiteness.

The man's look still rested upon her with unflickering directness. Again that peculiar smile hovered about his grim mouth.

"Yes, I am human," he said, after a pause. "I do not esteem myself as above temptation. As you probably know, I am a self-made man, of very ordinary extraction. But—I do not feel tempted to take up Burleigh Wentworth's defence. I am sorry if that fact should cause you any disappointment. I do not see why it should. There are plenty of other men—abler than I am—who would, I am sure, be charmed to oblige Lady Violet Calcott or any of her friends."

"That is not so," she broke in rapidly. "You know that is not so. You know that your genius has placed you in what

is really a unique position. Your name in itself is almost a mascot. You know quite well that you carry all before you with your eloquence. If—if you couldn't get him acquitted, you could get him lenient treatment. You could save his life from utter ruin."

She clasped and unclasped her hands in nervous excitement. Her face was piteous in its strain and pathos.

And still Field looked unmoved upon her distress.

"I am afraid I can't help you," he said. "My eloquence would need a very strong incentive in such a case as this to balance my lack of sympathy."

"What do you mean by—incentive?" she said, her voice very low. "I will do anything—anything in my power—to induce you to change your mind. I never lost hope until—I heard you had refused to defend him. Surely—surely—there is some means of persuading you left!"

For the first time his smile was openly cynical.

"Don't offer me money, please!" he said.

She flushed vividly, hotly.

"Mr. Field! I shouldn't dream of it!"

"No?" he said. "But it was more than a dream with you when you first entered this room."

She dropped her eyes from his.

"I—didn't—realise——" she said in confusion.

He bent forward slightly. It was an attitude well known at the Law Courts. "Didn't realise——" he repeated in his quiet, insistent fashion.

She met his look again—against her will.

"I didn't realise what sort of man I had to deal with," she said.

"Ah!" said Field. "And now?"

She shrank a little. There was something intolerably keen in his calm utterance.

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"I didn't do it," she said rather breathlessly. "Please remember that!"

"I do," he said.

But yet his look racked her. She threw out her hands with a sudden, desperate gesture and rose.

"Oh, are you quite without feeling? What can I appeal to? Does position mean a great deal to you? If so, my brother is very influential, and I have influential friends. I will do anything—anything in my power. Tell me what—incentive you want!"

Field rose also. They stood face to face—the self-made man and the girl who could trace her descent from a Norman baron. He was broad-built, grim, determined. She was slender, pale, and proud.

For a moment he did not speak. Then, as her eyes questioned him, he turned suddenly to a mirror over the mantelpiece behind him and showed her herself in her unveiled beauty.

"Lady Violet," he said, and his speech had a steely, cutting quality, "you came into this room to bribe me to defend a man whom I believe to be a criminal from the consequences of his crime. And when you found I was not to be so easily bought as you imagined, you asked me if I were human. I replied to you that I was human, and not above temptation. Since then you have been trying—very hard—to find a means to tempt me. But—so far—you have overlooked the most obvious means of all. You have told me twice over that you will do anything in your power. Do you mean—literally—that?"

He was addressing the face in the glass, and still his look was almost brutally emotionless. It seemed to measure, to appraise.

She met it for a few seconds, and then in spite of herself she flinched.

"Will you tell me what you mean?" she said in a very low voice.

He turned round to her again.

"Why did you come here yourself?" he said. "And at night?"

She was trembling.

"I had to come myself—as soon as I knew. I hoped to persuade you."

"You thought," he said mercilessly, "that, however I might treat others, I could never resist you."

"I hoped—to persuade you," she said again.

"By—tempting—me?" he said slowly.

She gave a great start. "Mr. Field——"

He put out a quiet hand, and laid it upon her bare arm.

"Wait a moment, please!"



For a moment he did not speak. Then, as her eyes questioned him, he turned suddenly to a mirror over the mantelpiece behind him and showed her herself in her unveiled beauty.

As I said before, I am not above temptation—being human. You take a very personal interest in Burleigh Wentworth, I think?"

She met his look with quivering eyelids.

"Yes," she said.

"Are you engaged to him?" he pursued.

She winced in spite of herself.

"No."

He raised his brows.

"You have refused him, then?"

Her face was burning.

"He hasn't proposed to me—yet," she said. "Perhaps he never will."

"I see." His manner was relentless, his hold compelling.

"I will defend Burleigh Wentworth," he said, "upon one condition."

"What is that?" she whispered.

"That you marry me," said Percival Field with his steady eyes upon her face.

She was trembling from head to foot.

"You—you—have never seen me before to-day," she said.

"Yes, I have seen you," he said, "several times. I have known your face and figure by heart for a very long while. I

haven't had the time to seek you out. It seems to have been decreed that you should do that part."

Was there cynicism in his voice? It seemed so. Yet his eyes never left her. They held her by some electric attraction which she was powerless to break.

She looked at him, white to the lips.

"Are you—in—earnest?" she asked at last.

Again for an instant she saw his faint smile.

"Don't you know the signs yet?" he



He put the cloak around her shoulders, and then, as she fumbled with it uncertainly, he fastened it himself.

said. "Surely you have had ample opportunity to learn them!"

A tinge of colour crept beneath her pallor.

"No one ever proposed to me—like this before," she said.

His hand was still upon her arm. It closed with a slow, remorseless pressure as he made quiet reply to her previous question.

"Yes. I am in earnest."

She flinched at last from the gaze of those merciless eyes.

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"You ask the impossible," she said.

"Then it is all the simpler for you to refuse," he rejoined.

Her eyes were upon the hand that held her. Did he know that its grasp had almost become a grip? It was by that, and that alone, that she was made aware of something human—or was it something bestial—behind that legal mask?

Suddenly she straightened herself and faced him. It cost her all the strength she had.

"Mr. Field," she said, and though her voice shook she spoke with resolution, "if I were to consent to this—extraordinary suggestion; if I married you—you would not ask—or expect—more than that?"

"If you consent to marry me," he said, "it will be without conditions."

"Then I cannot consent," she said. "Please let me go!"

He released her instantly, and, turning, picked up her cloak.

But she moved away to the window and stood there with her back to him, gazing down upon the quiet river. Its pearly stillness was like a dream. The rush and roar of London's many wheels had died to a monotone.

The man waited behind her in silence. She had released the blind-cord, and was plucking at it mechanically, with fingers that trembled.

Suddenly the blast of a siren from a vessel in mid-stream shattered the stillness. The girl at the window quivered from head to foot as if it had pierced her. And then with a sharp movement she turned.

"Mr. Field!" she said, and stopped.

He waited with absolute composure.

She made a small but desperate gesture—the gesture of a creature trapped and helpless.

"I—will do it!" she said in a voice that was barely audible. "But if—if

you ever come—to repent—don't blame me!"

"I shall not repent," he said.

She passed on rapidly.

"And—you will do your best—to save—Burleigh Wentworth?"

"I will save him," said Field.

She paused a moment; then moved towards him, as if compelled against her will.

He put the cloak around her shoulders, and then, as she fumbled with it uncertainly, he fastened it himself.

"Your veil?" he said.

She made a blind movement. Her self-control was nearly gone. With absolute steadiness he drew it down over her face.

"Have you a conveyance waiting?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

He turned to the door. He was in the act of opening it when she stayed him.

"One moment!" she said.

He stopped at once, standing before her with his level eyes looking straight at her.

She spoke hurriedly behind her veil.

"Promise me, you will never—never let him know—of this!"

He made a grave bow, his eyes unchangeably upon her.

"Certainly," he said.

She made an involuntary movement; her hands clenched. She stood as if she were about to make some further appeal. But he opened the door and held it for her, and such was the finality of his action that she was obliged to pass out.

He followed her into the lift and took her down in unbroken silence.

A taxi awaited her. He escorted her to it.

"Good night!" he said then.

She hesitated an instant. Then, without speaking, she gave him her hand. For a moment his fingers grasped hers.

"You may depend upon me," he said. She slipped free from his hold. "Thank you," she said, her voice very low.

A few seconds later Field sat again at his table by the window. The wind was blowing in from the river in rising gusts. The blind-tassel tapped and tapped, now here, now there, like a trapped creature seeking frantically for escape. For a space he sat quite motionless, gazing before him as though unaware of his surroundings. Then very suddenly but very quietly he reached out and caught the swaying thing. A moment he held it, then pulled it to him and, taking a penknife from the table, grimly, deliberately, he severed the cord.

The tassel lay in his hand, a silken thing, slightly frayed, as if convulsive fingers had torn it. He sat for a while and looked at it. Then, with that strange smile of his, he laid it away in a drawer.

II

The trial of Burleigh Wentworth for forgery was one of the sensations of the season. A fashionable crowd went day after day to the stifling Court to watch its progress. The man himself, nonchalant, debonair, bore himself with the instinctive courage of his race, though whether his bearing would have been as confident had Percival Field not been at back was a question asked by a good many. He was one of the best-known names in society, a general favourite in sporting circles, and universally looked upon with approval if not admiration wherever he went. He had the knack of popularity. He came of an old family, his rumoured engagement to Lady Let Calcott had surprised no one. Lord Culverleigh, her brother, was known as his intimate friend, and the rumour came already to be regarded as an accomplished fact when, like a thunder-

bolt, had come Wentworth's arraignment for forgery.

It had set all London talking. The evidence against him was far-reaching and overwhelming. After the first shock no one believed him innocent. The result of the trial was looked upon before its commencement as a foregone conclusion until it became known that Percival Field, the rising man of the day, had undertaken his defence, and then like the swing of a weather-cock public opinion veered. If Field defended him, there must be some very strong point in his favour, men argued. Field was not the sort to touch anything of a doubtful nature.

The trial lasted for nearly a week. During that time Lady Violet went day after day to the Court and sat with her veil down all through the burning hours. People looked at her curiously, questioning if there really had been any definite understanding between the two. Did she really care for the man, or was it mere curiosity that drew her? No one knew with any certainty. She wrapped herself in her reserve like an all-enveloping garment, and even those who regarded themselves as her nearest friends knew naught of what she carried in her soul.

All through the trial she sat in utter immobility, sphinx-like, unapproachable, yet listening with tense attention to all that passed. Field's handling of the case was a marvel of legal ingenuity. There were many who were attracted to the trial by that alone. He had made his mark, and whatever he said carried weight. When he came at last to make his speech for the defence, men and women listened with bated breath. It was one of the greatest speeches that the Criminal Court had ever heard.

He flung into it the whole weight of his personality. He grappled like a giant with the rooted obstacles that

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strewed his path, flinging them hither and thither by sheer force of will. His scorching eloquence blasted every opposing power, consumed every tangle of adverse evidence. It was as if he fought a pitched battle for himself alone. He wrestled for the mastery rather than appealed for sympathy.

And he won his cause. His scathing attacks, his magnetism, his ruthless insistence left an indelible mark upon the minds of the jury—such a mark as no subsequent comments from the judge could efface or even moderate. The verdict returned was unanimous in spite of a by no means favourable summing-up. The prisoner was Not Guilty.

At the pronouncement of the verdict there went up a shout of applause such as that Court had seldom heard. The prisoner, rather white but still affecting sublime self-assurance, accepted it with a smile as a tribute to himself. But it was not really directed towards him. It was for the man who had defended him, the man who sat at the table below the dock and turned over a sheaf of papers with a faint, cynical smile at the corners of his thin lips. This man, they said, had done the impossible. He had dragged the prisoner out of his morass by sheer titanic effort. Obviously Percival Field had believed firmly in the innocence of the man he had defended, or he had not thus triumphantly vindicated him.

The crowd, staring at him, wondered how the victory affected him. It had certainly enhanced his reputation. It had drawn from him such a display of genius as had amazed even his colleagues. Did he feel elated at all over his success? Was he spent by that stupendous effort? No one knew?

Now that it was over, he looked utterly indifferent. He had fought and conquered, but it seemed already as if his attention were turning elsewhere.

The crowd began to stream out. The day was hot and the crush had been very great. On one of the benches occupied by the public a woman had fainted. They carried her out into the corridor and there gradually she revived. A little later she went home alone in a taxi with her veil closely drawn down over her face.

III

The season was drawing to a close when the announcement of Lady Violet Calcott's



He took her hand and looked at it. His touch was cool and strong. He slipped the ring up and down upon her finger, testing it. It was as if he waited for something. She endured his action for a few seconds, then with a deliberate movement she took her hand away.

engagement to Percival Field took the world by storm.

It very greatly astonished Burleigh Wentworth, who after his acquittal had drifted down to Cowes for rest and refreshment before the advent of the crowd. He had not seen Lady Violet before his departure, she having gone out of town for a few days immediately after the trial. But he took the very next train back to London as soon as he had seen the announcement, to find her.

It was late in the evening when he arrived, but this fact did not daunt him. He had always been accustomed to having his own way, and he had a rooted belief, which the result of his trial had not tended to lessen, in his own lucky star. He had dined on the train and he merely waited to change before he went straight to Lord Culverleigh's house.

He found there was a dinner-party in progress. Lady Culverleigh, Violet's sister-in-law, was an indefatigable hostess. She had the reputation for being one of the hardest-working women in the West End.

The notes of a song reached Wentworth as he went towards the drawing-room. Lady Violet was singing. Her voice was rich and low. He stood outside the half-open door to listen.

He did not know that he was visible to any one inside the room, but a man standing near the door became suddenly aware of his presence and got up before the song was ended. Wentworth in the act of stepping back to let him pass stopped short abruptly. It was Percival Field.

They faced each other for a second or two in silence. Then Field's hand came lightly forth and grasped the other man's shoulder, turning him about.

"I should like a word with you," he said. They descended the stairs together, Burleigh Wentworth leading the way.

Down in the vestibule they faced each

other again. There was antagonism in the atmosphere though it was not visible upon either man's countenance, and each ignored it as it were instinctively.

"Hullo!" said Wentworth, and offered his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you here."

Field took the hand after a scarcely perceptible pause. His smile was openly cynical.

"Very kind of you," he said. "I am somewhat out of my element, I admit. We are celebrating our engagement."

He looked full at Wentworth as he said it with that direct, unflickering gaze of his.

Wentworth did not meet the look quite so fully, but he faced the situation without a sign of discomfiture.

"You are engaged to Lady Violet?" he said. "I saw the announcement. I congratulate you."

"Thanks," said Field.

"Rather sudden, isn't it?" said Wentworth, with a curious glance.

Field's smile still lingered.

"Oh, not really. We have kept it to ourselves, that's all. The wedding is fixed for the week after next—for the convenience of Lady Culverleigh, who wants to get out of town."

"By Jove! It is quick work!" said Wentworth.

There were heads of perspiration on his forehead, but the night was warm. He held himself erect as one defying Fate. So had he held himself throughout his trial; Field recognised the attitude.

The song upstairs had ended. They heard the buzz of appreciation that succeeded it. Field turned with the air of a man who had said his say.

"I don't believe in long engagements myself," he said. "They must be a weariness to the flesh."

He began to mount the stairs again, and Wentworth followed him in silence.

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At the drawing-room door Field paused and they entered together. It was almost Wentworth's first appearance since his trial. There was a moment or two of dead silence as he sauntered forward with Field. Then, with a little laugh to cover an instant's embarrassment, Lady Culverleigh came forward. She shook hands with Wentworth and asked where he had been in retreat.

Violet came forward from the piano very pale but quite composed, and shook hands also. Several people present followed suit, and soon there was a little crowd gathered round him, and Burleigh Wentworth was again the popular centre of attraction.

Percival Field kept in the background; it was not his way to assert himself in society. But he remained until Wentworth and the last guest had departed. And then very quietly but with indisputable insistence he drew Lady Violet away into the conservatory.

She was looking white and tired, but she held herself with a proud aloofness in his presence. While admitting his claim upon her, she yet did not voluntarily yield him an inch.

"Did you wish to speak to me?" she asked.

He stood a moment or two in silence before replying; then:

"Only to give you this," he said, and held out to her a small packet wrapped in tissue paper on the palm of his hand.

She took it unwillingly.

"The badge of servitude?" she said.

"I should like to know if it fits," said Field quietly, as if she had not spoken.

She opened the packet and disclosed

not the orthodox diamond ring she had expected, but a ring containing a single sapphire very deep in hue, exquisitely cut. She looked at him over it, her look a question.

"Will you put it on?" he said.

She hesitated an instant, then with a tightening of the lips she slipped it on to her left hand.

"Is it too easy?" he said.

She looked at him again.

"No; it is not easy at all."

He took her hand and looked at it. His touch was cool and strong. He slipped the ring up and down upon her finger, testing it. It was as if he waited for something.

She endured his action for a few seconds, then with a deliberate movement she took her hand away.

"Thank you very much," she said conventionally. "I wonder what made you think of a sapphire."

"You like sapphires?" he questioned.

"Of course," she returned. Her tone was resolutely indifferent, yet something in his look made her avert her eyes abruptly. She turned then upon the ring. "Why did you choose a sapphire?" she said.

If she expected some compliment in reply she was disappointed. He stood in silence.

Half-startled she glanced at him. In the same moment he held out his hand to her with a formal gesture of leave-taking.

"I will tell you another time," he said. "Good night!"

She gave him her hand, but he scarcely held it. The next instant, with a brief bow, he had turned and left her.

See next month's issue of "Hutchinson's Story Magazine" for the completion of this great love romance by Ethel M. Dell.



THE RETURN OF THE CONVICT

By W. L. GEORGE

Author of "A Bed of Roses"

ROBERT BARLOW stood outside the gaol. He was lonely, as the discoverer of a new world first footing an alien shore. Indeed, it was an undiscovered world, this old world long forgotten. Through slow years it had manifested itself to him, but only as the second fiddle in an orchestra. Once, a little while after his imprisonment, he had heard a warder tell another that he was going to vote Liberal this time. Thus Robert Barlow guessed that in the lost world an election was going on. Then, for years, there had been nothing except an extraordinary uniformity of daily life, meals that regulated time rather than were brought round by the clock, and a task without variation.

A few rumours had come from the outside, which spread hardly through word of mouth, but rather from spirit to spirit as in an Eastern bazaar, by a whisper in the yard, some admission from the chaplain. The

gaol heard some details of the Crippen case; many thought that Stinie Morrison had been wrongly lagged; of the war they were officially informed, and soon excitement spread through the prison when now and then a man disappeared before his time was up: it became known that he had volunteered, forsaken the buried world for a region of flame and death. And though a few chuckled behind their prison bars, told themselves they were well out of it, nearly all the young convicts volunteered, Barlow among them. But he was just too old, and his offence too heavy to earn the right to hazard his life. Echoes of the war had floated in. And there had been the exquisite excitement of air raids, which terrified the convicts because they could not do what instinct bids men do: to take cover in any place other than the one in which they are.

He remembered the daily hour of exercise, round and round in the yard, where

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the bricks in the walls had taken on individuality. He thought: "There's a chip in the mortar of the ninth brick from the gate, seventh row from the bottom." And already some sentimental memory of the past made him half regret that he would never see that brick again. It was gone. With the dead years.

The ex-convict took two hurried steps forward, and wondered half-childishly at the lack of restraint. Here was nothing to stop his progress. And overhead the new blue sky, unlimited by walls. Sometimes in the light square of his window he had seen between the bars, for a moment, a bird hover. Now there rested on his head a sky devoid of boundaries, streaked with a flight of starlings. He thought:

"Why am I not happy?" and realised that within him some spirit, infinitely sagacious, did not believe that he was free, but whispered: "It's no good your trying to move again or running away. You aren't out, not really. It's only like that time when they let you out for the day to give evidence when Jim killed the warder. They'll have you in again in a minute. Black Maria's waiting just the other side of those trees." A sideways glance told him that the warder at the gate was watching him. He thought:

"Keeping an eye on me. Like a cat with a mouse."

Then he underwent some slight convalescence. He remembered the hour-old scene, how he had come down to the office, stood at attention while they made out his discharge. He had seen his name in a big book, vaguely realised himself as somebody. Now they had closed the entry in the book. He had lost his uniform, his number, his place in the world. He was no longer Convict 1842, knowing what he was and what to do, but Robert Barlow, one of thousands of Barlows, tossed into a world not ready for him.

He started. A man had touched him upon the arm, and the touch terrified him. Barlow's only thought was: "There you are! Didn't I know? They've got me again." And the paralysis of his will was still such that he did not try to run away, to burst into that freedom which lay on the

other side of the curtain of trees. Then he realised that this man was not an official of the prison. He was very tall and lean; gentle blue eyes peered at him through spectacles. A tired old man, his face all stubbly, as if he shaved only at night. His dusty black clothes and the collar turned back to front reminded Barlow that there were clergymen in the outer world. He smiled: there had also been clergymen in the gaol. They were the only kind of man which one found in both worlds, and for the first time in twenty years a merry thought came to him: he wondered whether he would meet them in a world still dimmer and wholly unexplored.

"How are you feeling?" said the man, seized his hand and shook it heartily. As Barlow stared at him, he added: "I'm the prison-gate missionary. We don't want you to feel that you're just thrown out with nowhere to go. Well, well. I suppose it all looks pretty queer to you."

Barlow did not reply, and, undiscouraged, the missionary went on, quickly, as if he had often said this before and knew it by heart:

"Of course you're bound to feel rather at a loose end. Time passes. Things change. But, there! There's no call for you to despair. You're young yet, and the world isn't as hard as you think." He suddenly grew personal; "What's your name?"

"Barlow."

"Been in long?"

"Twenty years."

The missionary looked at him gravely. He respected the prison etiquette, which makes it bad manners to ask a man what he is in for. Besides, he knew his criminal law; he realised that even the most expert forger would have got out in fourteen years, and that this man must have taken life. He hesitated. This happened to be his first murderer, and the missionary, who had grown familiar with the burglar, who could work up some sympathy with that kind of modern adventurer, who felt technical interest in the wiles of the embezzler, and found some meeting-ground even with the spy, did not know what to

say to the murderer. Also he was a little nervous of him. So he plunged:

"Well, well, we can't stay here talking all the morning. A good sharp walk, and a good square meal, and a pipe'll put a different complexion on things. Perhaps you've already made your plans, and of course in that case I won't try to influence you, but if you take my advice as an old man who's seen a good deal of the world, you won't hurry. You've got a little money in your pocket. It won't last very long. It'd be a pity to waste it. And you might, you know. Don't you think you'd better let me do something for you, just as a pal? Suppose you were to stay at a hostel for a day or two, while you look about you and see what can be done?"

After a moment Barlow shook his head and said:

"Thank you, sir. No. I don't think so." He took a step forward, and the missionary, with a genuine air of distress, touched his arm again.

"But, look here, really I can't let you go like this, wandering like a lost dog. Where are you going? Have you got any friends?—any family?" As Barlow did not reply, he added: "Perhaps you've got a wife who . . ." He drew back, startled by the dark flush which rushed up into the man's face.

"Ah!" said Barlow, suddenly awake, "it's all very well talking of my wife, sir, but it's because of her I was in there."

"You didn't . . ."

"Oh no, I didn't kill her. I killed *him*." He smiled sideways, and said: "I'd do it again. I'd rather like to do it again."

"No," whispered the missionary, "you mustn't say those things. You know that quite well. There, you mustn't think about that—it's all over and done with."

Barlow shook him off. "Oh, it's all very well your saying it's all over and done with. You wouldn't think so if you were me and had had nothing else to think of for twenty years. What would you have said if you'd married a girl of twenty-two, and you'd thought, being a fool and only twenty-five yourself, that she was just a plaster saint and you a worm who ought to say thank you for being allowed to crawl round her?

What would you have done if you'd found out that there'd been another man hanging round her before you married her, and that she was still hankering after him when she was your wife? And he too. Hanging about at the end of the road for her to slip out to him of evenings."

"Don't think about it any more."

"What else is there to think about?" asked Barlow, his handsome, clean-shaven mouth tightening. "Haven't I had her picture before my eyes, even when I kept them shut, for twenty years? And she was a picture. She'd got blue eyes like that sky up there, but more shiny. And a dimple in each cheek: you could hide the tip of your finger in it when she laughed. And hair . . . oh, my God!" His voice grew hoarse: "Rolls and rolls of red gold . . . and one day when she let it down she trod on it and it tripped her up."

"There, there," said the missionary, patting his arm, "don't think of those twenty years. Think of the twenty years that are coming. You're forty-five, you say. Well, I'm sixty, and I'm not tired of life. There's lots more before you. Come with me. We'll find you a job in a place where they don't know your story. You talk like an educated man. Very likely you'll get on, make a good living. Who knows . . . if your wife's alive she . . . may not live for ever. There are good women as well as bad. Think of it, some other woman may come, who'll really love you. In a few years you may be playing with your babies by your own fireside."

Barlow gave a loud, discordant laugh. "Wives and children!" he cried. "No, thanks, I've had enough of that. No, I'm for the gay life. I wasn't telling you the truth when I told you that for twenty years I thought of nothing but her. I thought of lots of other things: having a damn good cigar. And drinking as much as I could hold. And putting a bit on a horse . . . though I'm afraid I'll be had; I haven't kept up my study of pedigrees. No more women except for fun, I can tell you that. I don't want another like her. Though, after all, perhaps I'm hard on her. She didn't want to marry me. She wanted him all along. I know. It came out at the

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trial. It was her mother did it, because I'd some money of my own. You may say I ought to have talked to her when I found out what was going on, and then I wouldn't have done it. I'd have been sorry for her, poor kid, having to marry the man she didn't want. She riled me, you know. She thought I was a muff; she called me a softy because I hated drowning kittens. And she said I had no determination, because once I wanted to go to the seaside when she wanted to go to the country, and I gave in." He laughed. "But I showed her. I showed her if I'd no determination. I was game enough to lay him out. And she knew it, too! I can remember her eyes at the trial and how they stared at me . . . as if blue lights had been hung in them. Ah! she did hate me."

The missionary did not know what to say, when a figure detached itself from the curtain of trees and came towards them. It was a woman, and as she reached the two men she hesitated, staring at Barlow with a puzzled expression in her eyes. She was very slight and pale, and her brown coat and skirt were worn and ugly. Her eyelids looked very red round pale blue eyes in her white face. Her hands, gloved in black kid, clasped the handle of her sunshade, a ridiculous ivory bird with green glass eyes. She stood, shifting a little from foot to foot, as if uncertain what to do. She was deprecating, as a dog that humbly seeks to make apology and goes, its tail ingratiatingly awag, to a certain beating and an uncertain forgiveness. Suddenly she set her teeth; one could see her jaw square. She came close, laid only her fingertips on Barlow's sleeve. The missionary turned and faced her.

"What do you want?" he asked. He was full of instinctive suspicion. Thus confronted with a creature born again into a world that did not welcome him, he felt paternal, tutelar; it was as if he became responsible for this man whom he received, dulled rather than broken, infirm of will and bereft of desire. So he stared at the woman, who had cast down her eyes. She surprised him, for he was familiar enough with sordid adventuresses that await men for years nurtured in abstinence,

and capable, on the recovery of freedom of ungovernable folly. She was neither young nor attractive, nor clad so as to please; nor was there in her manner anything jaunty. No lure this, sent to the ex-convict as the ambassador of a treacherous world. So he hesitated. He was impelled to cry out to her: "Go away, let him alone. The man is mine. He must be saved, yes, but he must be saved by me." So he said:

"What have you to do with this man?"

She did not reply. Still she stared at the ground, her mouth a little twisted, as if the determination which had urged her to this place were muted into fear. And Robert Barlow still looked away towards the curtain of trees, as if he did not notice the touch upon his arm of the kid-gloved fingers, as if, like a caged tiger, he mirrored in his eyes the past. Suddenly the woman looked up at the missionary, and the appeal went out of her attitude. Her eyes met his straightly as she said:

"I am his wife." She was in that moment filled with the dignity of her status. For she was his wife. Still his wife. She was something to him that no other woman, whether young, or rich, or charming, could be to him. She was the anchor which twenty years before he had dragged, and now they sailed into waters where, perchance, she might moor him. Into harbour.

"Oh," said the missionary, "you . . . Oh, of course. They'd let you know." He was still suspicious, for half a lifetime at the prison gate told him that even age and ugliness have their charms and their wiles. He realised that the prisoner, with a little money in his pocket, can easily be led by one who has the insight to discover his immediate desire. But he reflected that such approaches are not made with a white, drawn face and red-edged eyes. So he drew back, saying:

"You've done right. Take him away. Take care of him, and if you want any help by and by . . . somebody to say a good word for him, or advice, write to St. John's Prison Mission, here. The Rev. David Elsted will always find me."

He watched them for a moment go away.

the man obedient under the woman's guiding hand. And so they passed the Governor's house and disappeared towards the town, which a train was just entering, leaving grey cumuli of smoke in the radiant air.

They did not speak in the train. Instinct told the woman that her husband must recapture life slowly, that he must re-encompass it. Nor did he challenge her. While her eyes rested steadfast upon him, half anxious, half devoted, he looked out upon the country that unrolled, broad Dartmoor, purple-spangled with heather, and silver-split with rivulets of white water. As the hills rose and fell on the skyline, and upon the light wind the birch leaves shuddered, Robert Barlow was incredulous and amazed rather than glad. Everything was extraordinary, everything was novel.

At Okehampton several people came into the carriage—a little underfed man, a commercial traveller, who perused a stationery catalogue as if it were a breviary, and a fat country woman wrangling with two children. Her scolding did not disturb him. It was merely the vague chorus of a dream picture which unfolded before him, and only by degrees took upon itself the character of reality. So once again his wife had to take him by the arm and urge him out when they reached Exeter. He obeyed. He followed her into a fly that drove them through the unaccustomed town towards a careless destination. He passed up a small front garden, a gravel patch, in the midst of which a green pod of grass carried dusty begonias. A door opened. A hall yawned. The door closed. He sat down in the parlour, looked about him, and suddenly the dead life came alive. It was real and unreal: he had never been in this house before—indeed, never before had entered Exeter; for some reason unknown his wife had migrated here from London, yet all that surrounded him brought up the old life. He stared at the carved mahogany sideboard. By Jove! He'd bought that himself. And on the overmantel stood the toby jug he'd picked up in Kentish Town. For seven and six. And a rotten fake it was too. He garbled

a song of Wilkie Bard's, which had penetrated the prison:

*"It cost me seven and sixpence,
I wish I'd bought a dog."*

and smiled. The Nottingham lace curtains were belted with green satin. He didn't like that. He remembered other curtains . . . what were they like? . . . oh, yes, one of those art fabrics with messy designs that came out before the Boer War. All very long ago. A reminiscent pang overcame him, but the content of his body was too great as he nestled in the padded arm-chair. It felt queer after the wooden stool. Nice, though. And that old etching in the corner, "Harvest Home," that was jolly good. Suddenly he looked at his wife, still clasping in her gloved hands the sunshade with the absurd bird's head and the green glass eyes. Maisie! No doubt about it. He picked out one after the other her features, so altered, so familiar. Funny, he'd never realised she'd got that dry, pinkish skin. And her nose . . . it had been such a short, impertinent little nose; it didn't become it to have thinned. Then, as if with an effort, she looked at him and he grew more conscious of her tragedy, for he found in the blue eyes not a vestige of the old glow, nor in the hair, of which untidy strands escaped from under the gaily-flowered hat, the old blaze, the old sheen of molten gold. For a moment they stared at each other as if gripped in a conflict of wills. He felt neither hate nor attraction, only surprise. She must have understood him, for she bit her lip, and, taking a step forward, whispered:

"Bob . . . don't look at me like that. Haven't you . . . can't you? . . ."

Irrelevantly he replied: "It all seems so strange." Then, after a pause: "I never thought I'd see you again, Maisie."

His voice was so cold that she stiffened with anger.

"Perhaps you didn't want to. Perhaps you're sorry I came to fetch you."

"Oh, no," he said, after a moment. "I don't mind."

Her features twitched as if she were about to cry, and instinctively her hands went to her hair, patting it into order.

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Her femininity arrayed itself, and she thought :

"What a fool I was not to wear my blue! Only it's so out of shape. Past ironing." With a desperate air she came closer, leaning over him, her hands upon the table, and she stared at him, filled with intense desire to force into his eyes that ardent, tender gaze she had not seen for twenty years. As he remained passive, looking at her with unconcern, she realised at last things that the mirror had murmured in vain, because it had told its story so slowly, day by day. For a moment she did not see the man upon whom her eyes were fixed. She saw herself as she had been, white and round, heavy-crowned in radiant locks, and laughing. She remembered : he used to bury the tip of his little finger in the dimples which formed no more in the thinned cheeks. It was horrible. She thought :

"I'm forty-two. I suppose I look forty-two. Oh, it's no use pretending!" But she hated him then, hated him as she had not done when he roused her disdain, hated him more than when he slew her lover, because then he had outraged only outside things, whereas now he placed upon her the culminating insult of resisting her attractions. But at once her fury collapsed, and her hands fell helpless. What was to be done? Nothing. So she said :

"Let me get you something to eat."

She left the room, but she did not at once go into the kitchen. She ran upstairs, hurriedly took off her brown coat and skirt, and, after a moment's hesitation, put on her blue skirt and a white blouse. She ordered her hair. It lay easily now and without spring, this hair which had once been so unruly. Then, after a long pause, she dabbed her face over with the powder-puff. She thought :

"He used to hate face powder, but he's so different now. Perhaps he's different even in that."

Then, after a while, upon a tray she carried in a meal which she set out on the ready white tablecloth. He watched her carelessly, as if separate from the scene. At last she said :

"Come along, you must have something

to eat." Obediently he came to the table. He liked the soup, thin vegetable soup; easy to get down. But when his wife cut him a large slab of game pie, a delicious feeling of excitement arose in him. The exquisite scent of it rose like a prayer into his nostrils, and, greedily cutting off a large piece, he crammed it into his mouth. For a moment he chewed it. But the flavour disturbed him. He gulped down half his mouthful. Something sickened him. It was so heavy, so vigorous, this unaccustomed food. Good, too . . . he didn't know what was the matter with him : he chewed more slowly, tried to eat another piece, then put it down.

"Don't you like it?" asked his wife.

"Oh, it's all right. Only . . . it tastes so queer." They stared at each other for a moment, unable to understand the leap he was trying to make from prison food towards the sturdy meats of liberty.

"I can't eat it," he said, at last.

"Never mind," said his wife, consolingly. "Try something else."

He ate a little custard and a jelly. Those soft, liquid things, one could eat them. Better than skilly, anyway.

When he had done his meal, his wife stood up, and, with a sacramental air, brought him from the sideboard a filled pipe. He looked at it for a moment, caressing the dark, polished bowl. Funny thing to handle after so long. He recognised it—the stem he had half bitten through, and the crack at the edge which he had been afraid would spread. It hadn't had a chance to spread. Mechanically he took the lighted match from his wife, lit the tobacco, and sucked in greedy puffs. But at once he put down the pipe and began to cough violently, waving away his wife with a gesture of irritation. He dried his eyes and again pulled at the pipe, but the unaccustomed tobacco stank in his mouth, and his eyelids stung. He put the pipe down and murmured : "I can't." Then, in sudden weakness, he buried his face in his hands.

At once the woman flung herself on her knees by his side, and, clasping him about the body, hid her head against him. They so stayed for a long time. He



"I was mistaken about you . . . I thought you were one of those weak, namby-pamby people. I wanted a real man."

and unconscious comfort in her clasp, as a sleeping dog, unawares, delights in the streaming sun. But she, as she held him close, was mastered by a desire of extreme violence, that he should lay his hand upon her hair and so stay, hers as once he had been. But he did not move. It was as if she held a corpse from which

had recently fled the spirit that knew love. At last he raised his head, and, as he so did, she drew away a little to look at him. This was a cold, hard mask, concealing thought, and so set that it terrified her. She remembered: after all he had . . . and such a terror went through her that she had to speak.

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"Bob . . . don't look like that. I've . . ." She did not finish her sentence. She shrank from telling him that once before she had seen his features so set, and that an hour later he had killed her lover.

"What do you mean?" said Barlow, speaking to the wall.

"Oh, you frighten me so. You look at me as if you thought you'd squash me like a beetle, just to get me out of the way," she loosed her clasp. "I'm frightened of you, I thought it'd be all right, but . . ."

"Oh," said Barlow, "I see what you mean. You're afraid I'll murder you. You needn't be nervous. If I was to do that I'd have done it twenty years ago."

"But then," she cried, "if you feel like that, if you don't think well of me, why have you treated me like this all these years?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"My letters. You never answered my letters. Oh, don't say you couldn't," she went on, her injury suddenly raising her anger. "You could write a letter a month. And I wrote you month after month. And you never answered."

"You didn't stick it out to the end," said Barlow, bitterly.

"Well, what do you expect? I wrote to you every month for five years and you never answered. What was the good?"

"What would you have done if I'd swung in a month instead of being reprieved and getting out in twenty years? Gone to the cemetery and put a bunch of violets on my stone every Sunday when it wasn't raining?"

"Don't," she said, weakly. "Haven't we suffered enough, both of us, without going on like this? Didn't you believe what I told you in my letters, if you read them? Perhaps you didn't read them. But it's true, what I told you. I swear it's true. There wasn't anything between Jim and me. Oh, yes, I was fond of him, I'd been fond of him before I met you, and I couldn't help that. One can't alter those things; they just happen. But he couldn't afford to marry me, and you could. And mother would have it. Then Jim came along, and he was so unhappy, he said,

without me. He asked me to be his friend if I couldn't be more. What could I do? I couldn't let him hang about the road like that, with his pale face and his eyes getting larger as he got thinner, when he only wanted to see me now and then. But I did you no wrong. I was your true wife to the end. You killed him . . . just for nothing."

Barlow stared at her, thoughtfully, dabbing his forehead with his handkerchief, for the heat had grown heavier as the clouds massed upon the hills, promising a storm.

"Don't you believe me?" she asked.

"Oh yes, I believe you. What does it matter now?"

"Oh, but it does, it does!" she cried, full of an ecstatic need to convince him. "For that's not the end, Bob." She hesitated, her mouth open as if seeking words; then, throwing her arms round his neck, she kissed him, clasping him with all her strength, crushing her face against his, as if she would penetrate him, drown herself within him. He did not resist, and after a moment she drew back her head, wiped her eyes, and, in a low, hoarse voice, said:

"Bob, don't you understand? . . . I love you. You're my man. You've come back to me. Come back to me as my husband and let me love you; let me really be your wife as I never was before."

After a moment the man said: "Love me? It's the first time you've said it. You had your chance twenty years ago."

"I'm changed."

"Oh, how's that happened?"

She hesitated, then, in a furtive whisper, said:

"I was mistaken about you; I didn't know what sort of man you were. I thought you were one of those weak, namby-pamby people. You see, you always let me have my own way. You didn't understand. Often I only wanted my own way so that I shouldn't be let have it. That's women, sometimes. And men don't understand."

"No," said Barlow, "I didn't know that, but I understand now."

"Oh, never mind. Don't you understand that I thought you were a weakling

without pluck . . . but now I know you're different . . . I knew it from the day when you killed Jim."

After a moment, Barlow drew away. She shocked him; she was incredible and horrible. In a steady voice he asked:

"Do you mean that you didn't care for me when we were married, and that now you're in love with me because I killed a man?"

After a doubtful silence she replied, defiantly: "Yes, that's why. Oh, I don't mean I wanted you to kill Jim. If I'd felt you could do it, it'd have been all right. But I never felt you could do a thing like that. I wanted a real man. Then you did it."

Barlow shook himself free and stood up. "Seems rather hard lines on Jim that he should have to be killed to supply evidence," he said. "But never mind. Let me go; you make me sick." He stood for a moment at the window, staring at the heavy cloud-caps from which now came distant sounds of thunder. And the woman was afraid, but dared not break into his meditation. She felt entirely in his hands. She had said what she could say. The right of action lay with him, and now that she had gained belief in his purposefulness, his virility, she was content. So she stood and waited until he decided her course for her. Suddenly Barlow raised the lower sash of the window and calmly stepped out into the garden, passed the gate, went out.

He walked fast along the road, not caring where it led, and only from time to time drew his hand across his wet brow, for now the heat fell heavy as a blanket and the roll of thunder drew closer and closer. His mind was still filled with Maisie's revelation, and yet he was more conscious of her features than of her words. Those dim eyes, that meagre shape, that hair without lustre, all that belonged to the woman who loved him, but not to Maisie for whom he had given twenty years. The Maisie who had died the day they sentenced him, and could not rise again. He thought: "When I loved her she couldn't love me. Now she loves me, and it's too late. She's not what he was." And he did not reproach himself for realising that if after those twenty years,

by some miracle, there had come to meet him the Maisie he had last seen in the Old Bailey, such as she was, gold, lily, and rose . . . such a Maisie, even hostile, even guilty, he would have knelt to, while now he could only repel the new Maisie, even innocent, even loving.

As he went along the road the suburb grew sparser. The rows of houses gave place to terraces of semi-detached villas, then to large houses in their own grounds. At last he met the wall of a country park, and for some time followed the Exe that flowed sleepy and shallow. The thunder had come closer as he went, and now a sharp clap startled him. He stopped and felt with gratefulness the first drops of rain upon his head. It was exquisite, and as the rain came faster, in heavy drops that clattered separately upon the trees, making a sound like small beasts running, he felt cooler and more assured.

Faster and heavier came the rain, and still he stood. Water was flowing down his face from his soaked hair, making his clothes sodden. He stood among the Wagnerian sounds of the storm, reverberating artillery of the heavens, sharp musketry and flame of the thunderbolts. A great pall of rain had swung across the hills, and the waters of the Exe were stippled with millions of holes as the spears of rain pierced the grey glass of its waters. It lasted for a very long time, and so deafened, so blinded was he by the fury of the storm that he lost consciousness of time, and so stood, thrown by the rage of the elements into a state half comatose, where he saw himself as he had been, holding close the Maisie that had died with the years.

Some hours must have elapsed, for so entranced was he by his dream, so remote did he grow from the surrounding world in which he had found no heritage, that he realised with surprise that the storm was long done, that the sun of late afternoon was drying the road, and sinking swiftly into the western sky. He moved painfully in his clothes, which clung, heavy and wet, to his body. He thought: "I'm dripping," and this brought him back to the actual world. He thought: "What's to be done? I

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can't stay here. I must do something." Instinctively he felt in his pocket for the few wet Treasury notes and coins which had been given him as fruit of his labour for twenty years. "It isn't much," he thought. "I don't suppose I can live on it more than a week or two. I suppose I must find some work."

But an immense disgust of work, of association with his fellows in a workshop akin to the prison, came over him. He did not want to chain himself up again. He wanted nothing precise. Only to be alone and at rest. But mankind, he realised, would not let him alone. It couldn't; there were too many of them. Coming along the road he saw a couple, arms locked about waists, walking slowly and coming down towards the Exe. He stared at them calmly, rather than enviously. A workman and some girl out of a shop in Exeter, no doubt . . . holding hands and talking nonsense. They didn't know what they were in for and what life could do to them, very likely. But as they drew closer Barlow shrank away: he thought no more of them, but only of himself. Those two, those kids, they didn't know. They didn't know who he was. He wondered what they'd say if he went up to them and said: "I've come out of Dartmoor this morning after twenty years. I killed a man." He smiled as he thought of their frightened faces. But perhaps they wouldn't be frightened. Perhaps they'd just draw away because he was a convict, a disgraced man. He thought: "I'll run," but just then the couple climbed over a stile and disappeared across a field.

Now he knew that the eyes of his fellow-men must frighten him, because they must judge him. Once a convict, always a convict. They could never think of him as one of themselves. He must be horrible to them . . . or wonderful. Maisie thought him wonderful.

"I can't bear it," he said aloud. "I'll go abroad." But he remembered how little money was in his pocket, and also that abroad he would be faced always by the curious eyes of men, men who might find

out what he was. For a moment he looked at the river.

"I suppose one could drown oneself in that if one got to the middle."

Then, from down the road, he saw rising above a ridge the helmets and torsos of two county constables. He gazed hypnotised at the silver glitter of those helmets. They came along, talking, good-humoured, smoking pipes, and Barlow stiffened to show his manhood by waiting until they passed him. But he couldn't do it. The red faces, the heavy gait, the big eyes which they would fasten on him terrified him. Irresistibly compelled, he turned and hurriedly walked back in the direction whence he came. Once more he passed the wall of the country park, the big houses in their own grounds, the semi-detached villas, and arrived at the houses in rows. Instinct stopped him before a garden of yellow gravel, surrounding a pod of green grass and dusty begonias. He went in. For a moment Maisie stared at him, then said in a quiet voice, as if she took possession:

"You're very wet. Go upstairs and change your clothes."

He hesitated. Vaguely he had expected welcome, some explanation, some restatement of her love for him. They would have come to understand each other, have agreed that as things were they had better stand together, that they could live better together than alone, that after twenty years of solitude they could not affront the world, but must retire within each other's company. Perhaps Maisie understood all that, for she smiled, took off his wet coat, compelled him to remove his other garments that steamed a little in the rain & heat.

"Poor old Bob," she murmured. And moved by this sudden rescue from his loneliness, the man bent down and kissed her hand.

Whitely

FOURTH WALLS.

BY COSMO

HAMILTON



"Chris," whispered Rowena. "I didn't think this could ever happen to us."

Read this splendid story by the author of "Scandal," now in its 27th thousand. It is sure to please you.

THE woman with the white hair and black eyebrows, whose sequins scintillated in the moonlight, not only prided herself on a clear resonant voice, but on never being afraid to say precisely what she thought. These two accomplishments invariably go with black eyebrows, white hair, and scintillating sequins. The fun of it was that Christopher Belmore, the man from whose back she had stripped almost every scrap of moral clothing, was enjoying a good cigar in a nearby hammock well within earshot.

"So there it is, my dear," he said, approaching her peroration. "Married a little over two years to a girl as careless as himself, he has gone his way and she has gone hers ever since they returned from their honeymoon. I don't wish to suggest that either of them has done anything more than play the fool since then. Circumstantial evidence ought never to be allowed to hang anybody. But as a proof of the callous state of mind at which they

have both arrived, *he* is seen everywhere with the woman who was divorced on account of the man with whom *she* is openly flirting. And if that doesn't sum up the present lengths to which our younger set are permitted to go unrebuked, I shall be glad if you'll tell me what does."

Young Belmore got up, crossed the verandah, and stood in front of the chair of the lady who had surrounded herself with the tatters of his wardrobe. But he wore at any rate a charming smile.

"My dear Mrs. Mapleton," he said, "your summing up is quite masterly. Rowena and I, and the younger set, haven't a single leg to stand on. What an eloquent and powerful judge the law has missed in you."

He waited just long enough to see the lady's face turn as white as her hair before strolling into the garden. The odd and interesting experience of seeing himself as others saw him made him a little thoughtful for once. He had been breaking speed limits for almost exactly two years. To-

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morrow would be the second anniversary of the day during which, after a quarrel over something that he had completely forgotten, he had agreed with Rowena to give separation a trial. He and she were, in the pithy language of the lady with the far-reaching voice, "wealthy gutter-snipes." They had "haunted the city, dissipating youth and freshness in the foul atmosphere of night clubs and dancing places in company with people as careless and as futile as themselves." His education had been washed, and he had "deliberately gone back on the traditions and good form of his excellent family, and it was a good thing that his father and mother had not lived to undergo the pain and disappointment of seeing their only son go completely to the dogs."

These were strong words to apply to the youthful process that is universally known as sowing wild oats, he thought—the dramatic exaggeration of a woman with a dangerous "gift of the gab." And, as such, he endeavoured to dismiss them from his mind. He laughed at the term "wealthy gutter-snipe," but in order to take the state of it out of his mind threw his eyes with a sense of keen refreshment over the beautiful gardens of his sister's Southampton cottage, made magic by the moonlight. He was glad, he found, to be out of town, glad, he had to confess, to take a rest from the rather petulant demands of Violet Orme and the all-night frivolous set in which she moved and had her being. It was good to breathe that clean, sweet air, and stand alone beneath the infinite meadows of Heaven in which all the forget-me-nots of the angels were in full blossom. It was good, by way of a change, to smell the scent of honeysuckle and syringa, and to hear the sound, coming through the dusky glimmer of the night, not of the rush of city traffic, but the chorus of Long Island frogs.

He went along the Italian terrace, whose nymphs seemed to have paused in mid-motion to watch their shadows on the squares of stone, to the quiet pool, in which lay, as in a looking-glass, the reflection of the sky. The beauty, dignity, and simplicity of the place which, ordinarily, would

have earned a mere brief recognition, stirred and touched him as he stood there that night. He was surprised at this, being in the mood of a man who has been forced to stand outside himself and see what he looked like. He ought to have been bored and restless, and to have felt the irresistible call of the crowd and the bright lights and the lure of ragtime. He ought to have been a little sore at the impertinence of that talkative woman, and to have rankled under the truth of her scathing indictment.

The truth is always harsh. As it was, he knew that this pause in his perpetual joy-ride was welcome, although he was astonished that it should be; and, being fundamentally straight, he told himself that the ugly words that he had been obliged to overhear painted a pretty accurate picture of his mode of life and point of view.

And, as he stood out there in the moonlight alone and introspective, the memory of boy's dreams came back to him like an almost forgotten song. Old ambitions and aspirations formed up in front of him, and old ideals took shape and floated wistfully, like spirits, in and out of the thin trees. At one time life had held enormous possibilities, and not so many years ago he had tingled and stood with his shoulders back and chin high as his father had said to him, "Given health and a day, Chris, and you may conquer the world." And now—what? Behind him lay nearly two years of time foolishly and wantonly killed, money and health wasted and frivelled away, and a love, begun in all the ardour of splendid youth, dying for want of seriousness and sympathy.

Well, the tactless woman who prided herself on never being afraid to say precisely what she thought, had achieved something this time. She had made Christopher Belmore think. She had left upon his hitherto unused mind a healthy and growing idea that something might be done if he were to exert himself—that, if his present mood lasted, he might wipe those two decremented years off the slate and begin all over again. If she had known it, Mrs. Mapleton might also have congratulated herself upon having cut deep into young Belmore's careless heart. "It is a good

thing that his father and mother have not lived to undergo the pain of seeing their only son go completely to the dogs." Those words had entered like iron into his soul.

All at once a gentle, affectionate hand was laid upon his arm, and his sister, Belle Hallett, a little breathless, looked up into his for once unsmiling face. "I've been looking everywhere for you, Chris," she said nervously. "An extraordinary thing's happened."

Chris didn't say anything about the extraordinary thing that had happened already. He meant to tackle that alone. He simply asked, "What is it?" and put his arm round his little sister's shoulders.

"Rowena's turned up and wants to stay over the week-end. Without calling me up or sending a wire, she's just descended upon us to take her chance of there being a room for her. Isn't that exactly like Rowena?"

"Is it?" asked Chris. "I've almost forgotten. Can you give her a room?"

"Yes, I can, as it happens. But what about you? Do you mind? What worries me is that you may not want to stay under the same roof, and I shall be terribly disappointed if you pack up and go. It's so long since I've seen anything of you." She hung anxiously on his answer.

"Of course I don't mind," said Chris. "Why should I? Rowena and I are on the most polite speaking terms whenever we meet, my dear."

Mrs. Hallett heaved a sigh of relief. "I didn't know that. You've neither of you told me anything, and there are so many different stories going about. So you'll stay. That's splendid. Oliver's very cross, and wanted me to say that the house was full."

"That's not much like Oliver."

"Well, you see, she's brought a man with her, and you know how Oliver hates what he calls the loose ways of the younger set."

"Brought a man with her?" Even as one of the ringleaders of that very set, Chris was incredulous. Rowena knew perfectly well that Hallett belonged to the opposition camp of conventional, law-abiding people. Could Mrs. Mapleton's "present lengths" be carried so near the

edge of the limit? "Who? What's his name?"

"Merrill Shannon," said Belle. "Just think of it! It appears that they had a breakdown a little way from here on their way to Easthampton, and decided not to worry about going on. As they want something to eat, I must go and look after them. It's awfully sweet of you to take it like this, Chris." And away she went, excited but disturbed.

Take it like that? How else was he to take it? What right had he to say a word as to how Rowena ran her life? It was true that she bore his name, but that was not much for her to be proud of. For the rest, she had refused to accept any share of his income, and had lived on her own money. But for the act of marriage, which counted for so little with these ultramoderns, they had become mere acquaintances. Their only mutual interest was that they both played the fool. Whatever he did, to rescue the remainder of his own youth from dissipation, would have to be done alone. The girl whom he had married, in a good and even beautiful spell of adolescent romance, was running in single harness, perfectly happy and careless.

One thing, however, he would certainly achieve for the sake of old times. He would put the man who ought to have married Violet Orme out of the running. He would make use of this opportunity to rid Mrs. Christopher Belmore of Merrill Shannon, cad and lady-killer, and then start out to see what he could make of himself. Everything that was decent in him, every shred of gratitude and love for the memory of his father and mother, urged him to prove the last part of Mrs. Mapleton's summary untrue and undeserved. "So help me, God," he said to the stars.

That decided, he turned and marched back to the house. The French windows of the drawing-room were open. His brother-in-law was playing bridge at one table and his sister at another. Mrs. Mapleton and her confidante were sitting on a settee with their heads together. The white-haired lady with the black eyebrows and the scintillating sequins had received

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further fuel for her conversational powers by the sudden and unconventional arrival of two of the most famous members of the younger smart set. That was obvious.

Two figures were standing together on the verandah with the moonlight upon them—one, slight and blond and as graceful as a narcissus; the other, tall and square-shouldered and dark.

"Hello, Rowena!" said Chris.

"Oh, hello, Chris. What fun meeting you here." The voice was as light as the petal of a rose.

"Yes, I'm awfully glad. I shied at coming, but I see now why I came." He bent over her perfectly cordial hand.

"But we had no intention of stopping here. We were on the way to Emory's at Easthampton."

"Perhaps there was something occult about it," he said, laughing.

With even more of the consummate ease and equability that Chris remembered so well, this slip of a girl, this finished product of super-civilisation, this child who had been born to sophistication, half turned her fair head towards the man at her side. "You know Merrill Shannon," she said.

"No," said Chris. "How do you do?"

Murmuring an appropriate answer, Shannon conveyed, plainly enough, a desire to be left undisturbed as soon as possible with some one to whom he had the exclusive right.

And as Chris got it his back stiffened and his determination became as hard as rock. It was not his job to interfere with Rowena's choice of friends, but this one, this unscrupulous bounder, should find himself very properly unhitched before a new day broke, if he knew anything about it. It was written on the new leaf that he had just turned over.

He sat on the step at Rowena's feet with a cold shoulder towards her companion. "How do you go?" he asked.

"No grumbles," she replied, with a little laugh. "I caught sight of you one day last week. Pretty, isn't she?"

"Yes, and very charming."

"We're talking about Mrs. Orme," said Rowena, with one of her characteristic touches of audacity.

"Yes." Shannon attempted to appear uninterested, but his eyes flicked a little at the mention of Violet's name.

Chris deliberately ignored his existence.

"Have you been to the house lately?" asked Rowena, casually.

"I slept there about three weeks ago, but the camphor-balls chased me round to the club."

"How's that queer old housekeeper, Mrs. Pipkin?"

Chris laughed. "She wept over me. She considers that we're both quite beyond redemption."

"Does she? Funny old thing. I should have thought she'd forgotten me by this time."

There was a pause, but not a silence. In the water nearby the frogs continued their rasping chorus, and from away in the distance came the steady boom of the sea.

Chris leaned forward. "May I be personal for a moment?" he asked.

"I wondered how long you were going to be before you said something nice about my frock." She waited, with a flash of smile.

"It's corking, but I was thinking of your face."

"Oh, it's the same young face."

"Only prettier."

"Dear me," she said, "quite your old form, Chris. Do you remember the silly things you used to say on the yacht on which we became engaged? Who's got a cigarette?"

Two cases were instantly presented. She took one from Shannon's—a gold one, more opulent than useful. And then a servant came out and called attention to the fact that there was supper in the dining-room.

"And, believe me, I'm ready for it," said Rowena, rising with alacrity. "Come along, Merrill. You're starving. I know from every masculine sign."

Shannon followed her. He was sulky and obviously disconcerted. Young Belmont more was the last man whom he would have chosen to meet. At the door Rowena paused and turned her Romney-like face over her shoulder. "Would it bore you to come and watch us eat, Chris?"

"I'd like to," said Belmore

The lights in the dining-room were so arranged as to be kind to women who had passed the first flush of indisguisable youth. But from his place a little away from the long oak table, Chris Belmore studied the faces of the girl whom he had married for love, and the man who had removed the name of the girl with whom he, Chris, was seen everywhere from conventional visiting lists. He was quick to notice a rather tired look in Rowena's astonishing eyes, and something that seemed to him to be a little wistful round her lips when she failed to laugh. She forced her merriment, too, he thought, and gave him the impression of one who stood greatly in need of rest, but who wouldn't let go.

There was no doubt that Shannon had undergone a subtle change since he had seen him last. Discontent was all about him, and a certain nervous irritability. He made no effort to play up and keep the conversational ball in a rally, and once or twice he disagreed with Rowena with so sharp a note that even she raised her eyebrows.

Belmore didn't go back with these two to the verandah. He went into his brother-in-law's den and shut himself in. He had said that he was going to make something of himself for the sake of his father and mother. The chance had come to-night to begin at once. And there was something at the back of Rowena's eyes which thrilled him with the hope that she only needed a moral jerk to cut down her wild oats and face life and its duties sanely. There was even something in Shannon's face and manner which seemed to show that he was in the mood to make a change. Was he deluding himself in thinking this? Was it because he had been stirred into a sudden emotion that he imagined that Shannon and Rowena had come, as he himself had come, to the great cross-roads? It might be so, but, by Jove! he would take a chance. Out there in the garden, under the stars, he had cried a halt to folly, he had been moved to honesty, and the beauty and reality of a scene which lay under the magic of the moon had touched him deeply and mysteriously.

What could he do? It was not easy all

of a sudden to trample down the wild oats which had grown so high all about him and his wife and Shannon and Violet Orme. He dismissed at once the obvious idea of getting up a fracas with Shannon and ordering him off the place. It was not his place, and Shannon would have the right to say that Rowena could choose her friends. He dismissed also the equally obvious plan of going to Rowena and asking her to take up her life with him again. She would inevitably demand to know why she should be bracketed with Violet Orme. The maze in which all four of them had placed themselves, easy as it had been to get into, was difficult to get out of. He believed that Rowena had done nothing more than amuse herself with Shannon. He clung to his boyish faith in her. How was he to prove that his relations with Violet Orme were only those of a man who had desired a companion in lunacy? That was the point.

Walking up and down, with his hands deep into his pockets, he got as far as this and no farther. The way was blocked by the barrier of his own temperament and those of the other three. He feared the ridicule that he would ask for if he went frankly up to Rowena and Shannon and told them that he wanted to turn over a new leaf. His sense of civilisation rose up against a row with Shannon, and when it came to Violet Orme he had to confess that he had done much to add to the scandal which Shannon had attached to her name. She had to be considered too. Wild oats grew quickly and clung like burrs.

Suddenly he remembered that Violet was a member of a week-end party at a house within a thousand yards of his sister's, and that he had promised to meet her at ten o'clock on the hill that divided them, and then, at that instant, inspiration put a light into his befogged brain. Let them all four come together out under the stars, catch the beauty and sanity of the night, and, with the magic of the moon upon them, stumble into honesty!

Out he went, quivering with a strange excitement, believing, however unshakably, that they were all three, like himself, in need only of a little help to emerge from

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the high crop that entangled them. "Give human nature a chance," he seemed to hear in his brain. "It is fundamentally decent love, hope, fear, faith—these make humanity, and in every heart the Christ is born."

He found Rowena lying back in a deck-chair, gazing at a star. He stepped quietly and caught her face in repose. He had been right. It was tired and wistful. Shannon was leaning against a pillar with his eyes on the ground. His cigarette in a bugholder had gone out. He seemed to be miles away.

A clock in the house struck ten.

Young Belmore knew that he must go warily. Shannon had not spoken to Violet since the divorce—no one knew why—and Rowena had not chosen to meet her. Vitriolic was the only word to use in attempting to describe Violet's language whenever she mentioned Shannon—which was not often. So that art was needed in the process of achieving this meeting, which might not last any longer than a flash of lightning. "A wonderful night," he said.

"I suppose it is," said Shannon.

Rowena looked from one man to the other, and her eyes rested on Chris. What was it about him to-night that made her feel just a touch of pain in her heart?

Chris stood over Rowena. "Come up on the hill and have a look at the sea," he said.

She took his hand and allowed herself to be drawn to her feet. "Must I?" she asked. But she wanted to go all the same. His voice and the way he looked at her took her back two whole years, to that night on the yacht when he had proposed. What had they quarrelled about? She couldn't remember. It was her fault, probably. She had been idiotically young then. She felt old to-night.

Chris turned to Shannon. "Care to come?" he asked, casually.

There was a brief hesitation. Shannon had no use for the sea. Then he nodded and re-lit his cigarette and fell in step. This man had been Rowena's husband, but that was no reason for his marching her off.

They went slowly through the garden in silence. All the flowers were asleep.

Fireflies flashed their little lights and the moon silvered everything.

"Fairies are out to-night," said Rowena presently, putting her hand on Shannon's arm.

He glanced sharply at her. Her expression was that of a tired child. He had never seen it on her face before. He looked about. There were multitudes of stars. A full moon made him blink with its honesty. The scent of new-mown hay came to him. Yes, it was gorgeous. Why had things gone so crooked?

They made their way up the hill. Pale-faced daisies peppered the dry grass. They were on Violet before she or they realised it. Only young Belmore had seen her lying full stretch with her hands under her head.

She sat up, resentment in every line of her. Shannon drew up short. Anger and eagerness clashed in his expression. Rowena was not amused, and wondered why.

Belmore deliberately ignored the hideous awkwardness of the whole thing. "We've come to share the view," he said, "and I want you to meet my wife, Vi."

The two girls murmured appropriate words, and Violet, who had, months before, dropped Shannon like a stone, gave him "How do you do?" to which Shannon mumbled an answer.

What had seemed to all four entirely impossible had come to pass, quietly and naturally. It was almost unbelievable. These four of all people.

Rowena sat down near to Violet. The two men followed her example, and Belmore set a light to conversation. It was well done. He had relied on two things—civilisation and humanity—and they had not failed him. And for an hour he rolled the ball, lightly and with laughter, and the other three kept it going deftly. It was a strange hour.

And at last a silence came. Laughter died and artificiality petered out. But no one made a move to go. Nervously and with almost boyish self-consciousness Belmore, the still young Belmore, took a chance. Inspirations were rare. He must not waste this one. It had come, perhaps, from his father and mother.



"I've got a new game to suggest," he said, hedging. "It needs a night like this, with moonlight and stars, and it can't be played unless, as Rowena said, the fairies are out."

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"I've got a new game to suggest," he said, hedging. "It needs a night like this, with moonlight and stars, and it can't be played unless, as Rowena said, the fairies are out."

No one helped him or caught his eyes that glanced with eagerness from face to face. So he started again, with a courage that he didn't believe that he possessed.

"It's called breaking down the fourth wall," he said. "It's—it's about the hardest game ever invented. It's generally played by two people, but it doesn't spoil it to have four. The rules are, that the walls are not just potted at, but bashed right open so that everything can be seen inside, and that each person smashes his own wall."

He cleared his throat. He felt as though he were in a fern-house. All eyes were on him now, and in every one there was nothing of ridicule. It was almost too good to be true.

"Go ahead," said Shannon, grimly.

Belmore hesitated for an instant and then jumped in. "I've had enough of rotting about with Violet and the old crowd. I'm fed up with it. It's a fool life. I only took to it because of a row with Rowena. . . ."

"My fault," cried Rowena.

"No, mine. I wasn't such a kid as you were—and I kept on at it because I was afraid of being jeered at if I chucked it. I never was gone on Violet for a single instant. I liked her mighty well and was sorry for her."

Violet scoffed, but it ended in a sob. Shannon dug his heel into the earth.

"And now I'm out," continued Belmore. "The old town won't see me again until I've got my wind and muscle back, and Violet won't be bothered by me any more. I'm for sanity from to-night on, and I'm going to plug at getting Rowena back again for home and babies." His voice broke a little as he came to an end. "Who goes next?"

"I do," said Rowena quickly, before her courage oozed away. "I'm sick to tears of Merrill, of restaurants, smutty stories, late nights, and all the same old dull stuff. I'd have got out months ago

and gone home and played the game if I hadn't been afraid that Chris would laugh at me. Chris!" With a strange little cry she held out her hand. Belmore caught it and put it to his lips.

Violet and Shannon looked at one another queerly. They seemed to measure each other up, and wonder whether any good could come of their entering the game. Shannon remained silent, so Violet spoke. "Are you in this?"

"Yes," said Shannon, shortly. "Very much in."

"I'm listening."

"Ladies first."

"No," she replied roughly. "You go."

"I'm glad to. . . . I loathed and detested every minute of these wasted months. Rowena has never had the smallest attraction for me. I followed her about simply because you were everywhere with Belmore. The comic side of it appealed to me, to say nothing of the irony. If you hadn't turned me down we could have made all these months worth living." He almost shouted this, anger bursting from him like fire.

"I didn't turn you down. That's a lie," cried Violet. "After the divorce you never came near me and made me a laughing stock. People jeered and said, 'Look at her. Divorced for a man who's chucked her. The fool.'" She hit the earth with her open hand.

Shannon bent forward, his face working with emotion. "Chucked you! That's not true and you know it. You hurt me too much for me to come near you. You told Enid Taylor, the very day before I was on the way to you, that I was a dud. When you married again it would be for money. That's the only thing you cared about."

"I never said that. I swear it. I waited for you for days and days, and you never came. Can't you see how it's marked me? I went about with Chris to show you that I didn't care; but I did care, and I've often wished I was dead."

Shannon gave a cry and stumbled to his knees.

Belmore got up quickly, helped Rowena up—tears were running down her face—

and took her down the hill. The game was over. The fourth walls were gaping open as though broken by bombs.

"Thank God for human nature," he said, and held his wife against his heart in triumph and thankfulness. The woman with the white hair and sequins should eat her words, that's what she should do, every one of them.

"Chris," whispered Rowena, "the fairies must have been out to-night. I didn't think this could ever happen to us."

He kissed her. One night soon he would

tell her how he came by his inspiration. He was too happy to go into it then, and there were two years to make up. And as they passed through the sleeping flowers with the moonlight on them, on the way to a new beginning, Violet and Shannan cast one shadow on the hill, and there were dead wild oats all about their feet.

What was it that the shepherd said to his sheep dog? "Let 'em lag. They don't want you snarling at their heels. They'll follow the one who wants to come home. They ain't all fools—sheep."

Cosmo Hamilton

CAN YOU TELL THE PUBLIC TASTE?

A fascinating £100 Prize Competition

As the Publishers would like to have the views of Readers on the popularity of the stories in "HUTCHINSON'S STORY MAGAZINE," they have decided to offer Fourteen Prizes for the fourteen best lists sent in of *the sixteen most popular stories* in the first six numbers of "HUTCHINSON'S STORY MAGAZINE." The sixteen stories selected by the competitor must be placed in what he or she considers their order of merit, the one thought best of all being placed first, the next best second, and so on. What are the sixteen best will be determined by the general vote of all the competitors, and the prizes will go to the competitors whose lists most nearly correspond with this general vote. An instalment of the serial or a series may be reckoned as a story. THE PRIZES WILL CONSIST OF:—

A FIRST Prize of £50.

A SECOND Prize of £25.

A THIRD Prize of £10.

A FOURTH Prize of £5.

TEN further Prizes of £1.

CONDITIONS

All competitors' lists must reach Messrs. Hutchinson & Co. before the end of next January in a stamped envelope addressed to Messrs. Hutchinson & Co., 34, Paternoster Row, London, E.C., and marked on the outside "Hutchinson's Story Magazine Prize Competition." This list must describe the sixteen stories, and must show also the number of the page of the Magazine in which the story commences. The list must be signed by the competitor with his or her full name and address legibly written, and must have attached thereto the four coupons, Nos. 1 to 4, which will be given with Numbers 3 to 6 of the Magazine. Coupon No. 1, given on page 266 of this Number, should be cut out and preserved until the list is sent in, and so with regard to the remaining coupons. Any competitor not strictly adhering to the conditions will be disqualified. The decision of Messrs. Hutchinson & Co., the publishers of the Magazine, as to the merit of the lists and the award of the prizes, and on any question arising out of the Competition, to be accepted as decisive and final.

The result of the Competition will be announced in a later number of this Magazine.



Author of "The Landlord of the Love-a-Duck"

IT simply would not come right. David Stroud sat back in his chair and stared out of the window, with all the sheets of manuscript scattered on the table in front of him. Thus he had sat for nearly three hours, without once putting his pen to the paper. He knew that the main idea for the book was a good one, and there was a kind of second theme a little below the surface which intrigued him, but things would not, somehow, dovetail. He stared from the window to the fireplace; he bit his nails (a very bad habit); he lighted a cigarette and walked up and down the room. It was a meagrely furnished room, with a bedroom adjoining, the two comprising his lodgings in an obscure house in West Kensington.

David was young—barely twenty-three—and he had come to London from the cathedral town of Norwich, with the usual determination to set the big city by the ears. His father had been an organist and music-teacher, and on his death had left a small sum of money to be divided between

David and his sister Hilda. It brought them in about eighty pounds a year each, but Hilda had since married a fairly prosperous young doctor and continued to live at Norwich. The mother had died when they were both quite young. David, consequently, was alone in London except for several chance acquaintances. Loneliness has its compensations as well as its bleak disadvantages. He did not entirely regret his loneliness. To a man who is going to set London by the ears, write the big novel, the world-disturbing play, a large amount of loneliness is essential.

He had been in London a year, and had had one or two short stories accepted and had done a little hack journalism, but the big novel was still in a very embryonic stage, and on this morning, after two hours' abortive thinking, he suddenly became intensely alive to his loneliness. It was June, and pale sunlight was streaming through the windows. Somewhere the world must be very beautiful.

"I know what it is: I'm stale," he thought.

He contemplated a walk in the park—his usual recreation—but decided that this would hardly meet the case. It was change he wanted: something definite and magical at the same time. He thought for a long time, and then went and borrowed an old Cassells' time-table from his landlady. He knew nothing about the country near London, but he reckoned that one would have to travel for at least an hour to escape from bricks and mortar. At last he pitched on a place called Moblesham-by-the-Mill. He liked the name. It was on a side line not far from Guildford. The fare was cheap, and it would be somewhere near the Surrey Downs. It would serve.

Rather apathetically he boarded a motor-bus to Waterloo and took his ticket. The train journey wearied him, and when he arrived at a station where he had to change, he hesitated whether he should not return. He had a premonition of failure. The people in the train irritated him; the interminable suburbs gave him no hope.

Even when he arrived at Moblesham-by-the-Mill he was doomed to disappointment. It was a plain, villa-y little town, with an ugly main street, a large brewery, and innumerable tin chapels. There was no mill, and no evidence of there ever having been a mill. It was nearly midday when he arrived there, and he walked listlessly into an inn and ordered some bread and cheese and some shandy-gaff. Having negotiated this modest lunch he started out to walk. The road led for nearly a mile between high hedges with fields on either side, and then began to slope upwards. His legs ached; the prospect of a climb depressed him. Coming to a fork in the road, he chose the narrower road which still led upwards. After a time the country opened out more, and he sat on a gate and smoked a cigarette.

"I'm in rotten condition," he thought. The cigarette had no attractions for him, and he wanted to lie down and sleep. So insistent was this desire that he decided that he must make a determined effort to counter it. He threw away the cigarette and began to walk briskly. He selected a narrow lane which led through a copse of young larch trees. His choice was influ-

enced largely by the fact that the lane was steeper than the road, and he wanted to do what he didn't feel inclined to. He urged himself forward. The air was becoming very fresh and sweet and the birds were singing gaily. He began to think about his book, but nothing happened; the same old ideas still jumbled against each other. He crossed a stretch of common and caught a glimpse of blue distances; he was certainly up in the Surrey hills. An old man passed and touched his hat. David jerked out:

"Oh, how do you do?" in the tight voice of a man who has been too long confined to city life.

He passed a farm where a team of large sleek horses were just returning to the fields in charge of an old carter and a boy. David sighed, and rested once more against the farm-gate. He *was* in bad condition. And yet there was something a little soothing in all this.

He went on. Suddenly the lane forked again. This time he took the lower turning, because it seemed the more deserted, better attuned to his melancholy mood. He had not progressed more than four hundred yards when he came to the dingle.

It nestled in the hollow of a disused chalk-pit. It was wild and overgrown with shrubs, gorse, and delicate birch trees. He instinctively plunged into it. The soil was sandy; fresh young green leaves tickled his face and hair, brambles caught at his trousers. He came to the carcass of an old fallen tree partially covered with moss and lichen. He chose a part of the stem where the bark had peeled away, and sat down.

It was extraordinarily quiet and remote. He had never felt so cut off from the world. Bees droned around him in the gorse, the little sounds of birds and living things unfamiliar to him soothed his senses. The sun, streaming through the leaves, made bewildering patterns. Martins swung in semicircles at the top of the pit.

It was . . . somehow, cosy. He sat with his elbows dug into his knees and his hands holding his head, and examined the activities of some red ants darting in and out from beneath the bark of the tree he

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sat on. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the ants would get on to his trousers or his coat, and crawl all over him. He edged farther away, and looked around him again. He felt like a small boy scenting adventure, but slightly nervous of the unknown. In this arabesque of sunlight and foliage it was difficult to detach things. It was the kind of place that a small boy could imagine the eyes of a tiger, or a rattlesnake, or even—a Red Indian! He would like to be a small boy again, playing at Red Indians with his sister Hilda in the garden at Norwich. His mother's slim figure in the doorway. . . .

"Why should the father-confessor himself not be the lover, his secret hidden behind his dark cowl? Why should he not tell the story?"

Strange! but as David sat there blinking in the sunlight he could almost swear that a voice whispered this into his ear! What did it mean? The father-confessor? Why, yes, of course there *was* a father-confessor in the story. . . . It had not occurred to him. He was not thinking of his book, but suddenly he began to think very rapidly. The whole thing unfolded itself before his mind's eye. On those lines the story would be much more manageable. The various themes began to co-ordinate. His pulses were throbbing at an unaccustomed rate. He could see it all. The main idea became simple and dignified, inevitable. Everything took its place. His fingers itched to set it down; but he had not even a note-book.

He sat there till the sun began to set, and no one disturbed him. He glowed with a quiet contentment, feeling himself the medium of expression of forces greater than himself. Then, when the light began to fade, he rose up and shook himself.

"Queer," he thought, "that it should have come like that! Of course it was nonsense my fancying I heard the voice. I'm ridiculously run down; I must do this more often."

He walked quickly down the hill, humming to himself. When he arrived home he snatched a hasty meal, and then he sat down to write. He wrote all night.

He slept till the afternoon, and awoke

still tingling with the sense of new-found power. Thoughts came easily, and had only to be set down. For nearly three weeks he worked at pressure. The story made astounding progress.

And then another day came when the feeling of emptiness and lassitude assailed him. He struggled through the day, restless, feverish, and discontented. He wanted to go on, but his brain seemed disinclined to work. On the other hand, in his anxiety to get the book finished, he resented having to waste a day in the country. When night came he realised that he had accomplished nothing. He slept badly and rose at dawn.

"I must go for another tramp," he thought. He caught the earliest train and went to Epsom. He walked up to the Downs. A light breeze was building up a splendid architectural arrangement of clouds. It was a glorious day. He walked, and walked, and walked. Sometimes he rested and began to think of his book, but no ideas came.

"It will come as before, quite suddenly," he determined. "I feel better, anyway. It's foolish not to do this more often."

He walked till the evening, occasionally lying down by clumps of bushes, leaning on stiles and gates, humming, and—trying to think. When it became time to go he felt his limbs quivering with exhaustion, but no progress had been made with his work. He returned home disgruntled and crestfallen.

The next day he found himself in no better case. He idled the day away, the issue of the book becoming more confused. At the end of the week he made another desperate sortie on to the fields and lanes. Still without result.

It was not till the following Wednesday that he decided that he would once more go back to the dingle. It was a grey day, but tolerably warm. He took the train to Moblesham-by-the-Mill, and started out to find the dingle. He had some difficulty in doing this, as he had made no note of the roads and turnings which he had taken on the previous occasion. He wandered afar, came back, and at length recognised the little lane which skirted the chalk-pit.

The dingle had lost its wild pattern of bewildering sunlight and shadow. It was in a benign mood. The air was tender and caressing. The young trees nodded in a companionable manner. A rabbit darted from a hole in the sand, stared at him with almost friendly eyes, and then scampered away among the bracken. He felt that he wanted to laugh. He sat on the fallen tree and began to think of amusing incidents of his boyhood. All his present troubles were forgotten. And then, suddenly, something seemed to whisper in his ear:

"The fisherman goes from the east side of the river to the west, from the west to the east. Is it only fish he carries in his basket?"

He started. What was this strange intrusion? What fisherman? What basket? What river? What did it all mean? His mind reverted instantly to the book. Fisherman? There was no fisherman in the book, but... yes, of course, the character of Fra Lomberto. . . . It would be possible . . . the analogy was obvious. Clearly and swiftly his mind began to work. The ill-assorted arrangements of ideas fell into a proper perspective. He visualised the working-up, the development of character and plot, the climax, the slackening, and the easy passage to a surprising finish. The whole thing was complete and finished in his mind.

David gazed around him, surprised, delighted, and mystified. He peered into the bushes and mounds of sand as though expecting some elf with gossamer wings to spring before him, playing upon a reed. He trembled with a kind of exultation. He did not believe in spirits or elves. But—there *must* be something about the dingle!

He put his hands to his head and staggered to the lane. Of course it was absurd! It had just so happened. Ideas came to one at odd and unexpected moments, and they had happened to come on the two occasions when he had visited the dingle.

He hurried down the hill and caught his train.

For over a month he worked uninterruptedly. The book was finished and de-

spatched to a publisher who had shown an interest in his work. But it was not published for six months. In the meantime he was at work on other things: a play, some poems and essays, and another novel. It was not till late in the autumn that he became convinced that—for him in any case—*there was a genie of the dingle!*

For he tried the experiment again and again, and it never appeared to fail. Directly his creative power became stagnant he took the train to Moblesham and sought his dingle. Sometimes the little whispers of the leaves were slower in their delivery of the revelation than at other times, but they never utterly disappointed him. On occasions the illumination would not come till he was returning from the dingle, or even till he went to bed that night.

One day he tried the experiment of writing in the dingle. He took a writing-pad and fountain-pen, but the result was not successful. Ideas came, but not the facility to set them down. He was distracted by the sunlight and the movement. It did not appear to be within the covenant of the high gods who presided over this enchanted spot. It was essentially a place for inspiration, for adjustment, but not for the deliberate prosecution of a routine.

In the winter, when the book was published, it happened to catch the eye of a luminary in a little office off the Strand, who foresaw the glories of a personal scoop in "discovering" a young and unknown writer. He let himself go in a weekly journal devoted to such flings, and became maudlin over it in a large club in St. James's. It had no great sale, but it attained a *succès d'estime*. Other works were published and commented upon.

Even in the winter he visited the dingle. When the trees were bare and there were great squidgy pools of water, he would still go and plunge about, humming to himself, laughing gaily, feeling virile and joyous. And the little voice was always eloquent. He began to know every mound and tree and shrub in the dingle, and he watched their growth and colour and peculiarity.

David was not a mystic. He tried to explain the whole thing to himself.

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"There's just something about this place that's sympathetic. The walk is good for me. By the time I get here I am feeling well. They are not really voices I hear. Only I like it; it's very beautiful, extraordinarily quiet and remote, and then the—combination of things stimulates me. That's all to it. But it's very queer."

It was two years later that David met the genie face to face. He was becoming a successful man, already recognised as being more than "promising." "This young author is going to count," announced the Delphic oracle of the literary world. He had moved to more commodious rooms and had even bought an upright piano, on which he groped his way to vague satisfactions.

One day late in June he was sitting in the dingle, musing upon the strange influence it had exercised upon his fate. The dingle was in its wild, patterned mood, the sunlight dancing through the leaves. He was staring idly at the quivering appearance of a stunted almond tree, and thinking how difficult it was in this effect to separate one tone from another, when suddenly he became uncomfortably aware that eyes were watching him through the pattern.

He stood up, and instantly a branch quivered vertically and the genie sprang lightly to the ground near his feet. She had bright, Puck-like eyes, and an oval, elfish face framed in a mass of dark brown hair, a dark green fustian kind of tunic and brown-stockinged legs. She said:

"Oh, I say! I'm awfully sorry!"

David stared at her foolishly, and echoed:

"I'm awfully sorry!"

It was obvious that each felt that they were prying into the privacy of the other's life.

"I didn't see you till just now," remarked the genie.

"Oh! I was only just sitting there," answered David limply.

"It's very jolly here," said the genie.

"Do you live here?" murmured the mystified young man.

Then the surprising visitor from the

spirit-world laughed and shook her shining hair, and in the process displayed a line of small and perfect teeth.

"I do, pretty nearly," she answered. "I live down the road at that red house. It's called 'Clonbeggan' for some reason or other. I haven't any brothers or sisters, and I come here nearly every day. My father's a doctor, and he's always busy; and my mother's in London."

She sat on her haunches on the sand, with her legs crossed, facing him. David stared at her as though still doubtful of her reality. She was just a girl, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, the daughter of a country doctor. At least, that was what she said. But what was real and what imaginary in the dingle? He said huskily:

"You say you come here often?"

"I've been here nearly every day for years and years and years."

"Strange that I have never seen you!"

"Why do you come to the dingle?"

David started. He felt curiously alarmed and self-conscious. He looked down at his hands and coughed. Then, leaning towards her, he said:

"Do you ask why I come? I'm a writer, an author. I come to the dingle because——"

He paused, and suddenly she leapt to her feet and clapped her hands.

"Oh, I know! I know!" she said. "How lovely!"

And shaking her roguish curls at him, she darted away through the trees.

David stretched out his arms and called after her; then realised that he was behaving rather ridiculously, and sat down. After all, it was quite simple. A lonely little girl living not far away. She came here to play. But why had he not seen her before? Had she been watching him? What did she mean when she said "I know!"? And, above all, would he see her again?

He returned home, thinking of his work and the elfin-child. Her visit had been so brief and her movements so quick he had not had the opportunity to study her as he wanted to. But she was very beautiful, very vital—a goddess worthy of the dingle. He was in an inspired mood the

next day, and he began what proved to be his most successful work, an allegory called *The Chalk Pit*.

He visited the dingle three times before he saw his genie again. And then, one day, she slithered between the branches of the almond tree and threw herself on the ground by his feet. He gave an exclamation, and she said:

"Well?"

He put out his hand, but without touching her he exclaimed:

"Oh! it is you. I've been looking for you."

"I've seen you twice."

"Why didn't you speak to me?"

"You were working."

"How do you know?"

"I could tell by your face."

"You queer child! Tell me your name."

"Stella."

"I love the name of Stella."

"Read me something you've written."

"Alas! I've nothing here."

"Tell me a story, then."

David blinked at the sunshine, real and imaginary. He smiled, and wondered, and worshipped. Then suddenly he began to tell her the story which he had not yet written, *The Chalk Pit*. He pieced it together, watching the joy and sorrow and sympathy flicker across her sensitive face. And when he had finished it she was crying, and he said:

"I'm sorry, Stella."

She did not look at him, but she replied:

"No. I like to cry. It's very beautiful." And suddenly she snatched his hand and kissed it, and walked away through the trees.

After that she seemed bolder. Nearly every time he visited the dingle she came to meet him, and he found the place more inspiring and fruitful of ideas than ever. Before the end of the summer he called on her father, Dr. Parsons, a rotund, red-faced little man quite unlike his daughter. He was courteous, but somewhat preoccupied. He sat forward, leaning on his elbow, and asked David a few questions about his professional life. He listened to the replies without giving the impression that they had sunk in. A dog-cart was

waiting to take him on his rounds. He rose at the end of ten minutes and pressed David's hand, and murmured:

"Very delighted . . . any time," and he waved his hand vaguely towards the fireplace.

David heard afterwards from the villagers that Dr. Parsons' wife was a very beautiful Roumanian lady. But there had been some great trouble. They no longer lived together. She was in London or Paris, and she never visited her husband or child.

And in time David went beyond the dingle. He went for walks with Stella, and sat in her garden under the walnut tree, and told her of his ambitions, and his life, and his sister, and his work, and the people he met in the social life which was gradually enveloping him.

For three years this strange friendship grew and quickened, and David was then referred to as "this brilliant young author," and his sister Hikla, in her placid home at Norwich, blushed with pride, and wealthy people sought him out, and publishers began to jostle each other for his wares. And David was dazzled. He was accomplishing what he had set out to accomplish, and all within the space of five years. He began to adore flattery, and adulation was food and wine to him.

There was only one disconcerting element in this joyous scheme. He encountered it on the lawn of Dr. Parsons' house. It came in the person of Ephraim Barnes. Ephraim Barnes was a young, keen-faced man of Semitic origin. He was a successful builder and contractor, who drove about the country in his own car. Being cured of a bad attack of sciatica by Dr. Parsons, he had visited him, and there, of course, met Stella. Stella showed him no special attention, but Ephraim was persistent, keen, and thorough. And suddenly David realised that he was jealous. Finding him there on three successive occasions, he took his dingle-maiden to task.

"Stella, are you fond of this man?"

"No, David."

"Not a bit?"

"Not a scrap. He bores me."

"You would never marry him, Stella?"

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Stella peeped at him coyly, and remarked: "Oh, dear! oh, dear! how foolishly you talk!"

On his way home David suddenly thought:

"Good God! I'm in love with that girl!"

And he began to reason with himself. To be a "brilliant young author" and to have arrived are two very different things. David was by no means well off. He lived above his income. He found fashionable house-parties far more expensive than expensive hotels. He ached to buy antique furniture, pictures, to have a beautiful house; and he could see no prospect of attaining anything so fantastic. His palate for success had been whetted, but the banquet had not begun. What was he to do? He had seen the distressing results of some of his friends marrying when they were not in a position to. They went down the sink; they prostituted their art in the sordid struggle; they became hemmed in by babies, domestic troubles, and insistent material demands. They soon ceased to count. And yet—Stella! Her eyes followed him through the dim shadows of the night. She was an obsession, an angel, a nymph, his genie of the dingle.

He hesitated, and did nothing. He visited her home and the dingle, and he drew inspiration from both. He fumed with jealousy at the sight of the unspeakable Ephraim. But the summer passed, and the winter, and the position remained the same.

And in the following spring he met Laura van Steyn. He met her at a house-party at the Frankenstein-Possets, the Bond Street picture-dealers. She was tall, fair, rather distinguished-looking, very emotional, and gorgeously apparelled. She was a widow, three years older than David, and enormously wealthy. Her husband had been an American canned-fruit magnate. There was nothing of the canned fruit about Laura. She was passionately devoted to art and artists; she devoted her life to helping and flattering young painters, and musicians, and writers. She did not spare herself with regard to David. She took him aside under a pergola dark-

ened by clusters of blood-red roses, and told him, more by the heaving of her bosom and her breathless intonation than by what she said, that he stood on the threshold of being what George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and others had tried to be. And David drank it in, and realised that here was a divinity. Little diamonds sparkled at her throat, a gold bag hung by a wondrous antique chain nestled between the folds of silk upon her lap. Her skin was incredibly fair, and there was a watchful beauty about her eyes, as though she were the high-priestess guarding the sacerdotal offerings of all that was more priceless and forbidden in human life.

David walked with her, and as he had nothing else to flatter, he flattered her beauty and her intelligence. Before the house-party broke up she invited him to visit her in town. Alas! poor Stella.

Followed then a year of doubt, contrition, and dazzling dreams.

On the eve of the day when he married Laura, she said:

"My darling, you shall be the greatest writer in the world. Everything shall be arranged for you. In London you shall have the walnut-panelled room overlooking the park as your study; and at Fobbiessham we will build a bungalow hidden right away in the woods, where not a sound shall disturb you. But change, change, is the great thing to a creative artist. I understand the artist soul. We will travel. You shall have beautiful rooms to work in at Naples, Florence, Venice, and Sicily. Always a change, fresh experiences, fresh people. We will go to Egypt and Algeria, India and China. We will build a world of beauty around us, collecting as we go, adding to it, studying, finding more and more in each other. Kiss me, David."

They stayed two months at Naples in a villa overlooking the bay. David had a large study furnished with François Premier furniture and Persian rugs, and a writing-desk reputed to have been the property of Racine. And for six hours a day he sat there, staring at blank sheets of paper or reading over the things he had written last year. Sometimes he would start up and look out of the window at the bay.

and other times he would bury his face in his hands and dream—of Stella and the dingle. He would visualise the last time he had visited her, her laughing, innocent eyes, the chain of marigolds she had made and crowned him with, her babbling excitement over the things they were going to do together; and, O God! he had never told her! His courage had failed him. He was a coward, and he could not think. Thoughts were going round and round and jumbling each other, and there was no genie to set them right!

He plunged into social dissipations. He bought experiences to which he had been previously a stranger, and he could do nothing with them. He told his wife he could not work on his honeymoon, and she was enchanted.

"There is no hurry, *mon brave*," she said; and they went to Sicily.

They travelled from Sicily to Algiers, from Algiers to Cairo; then down the Nile as far as Fashoda, back from Fashoda to Cairo; crossed to Genoa, visited Florence, Sienna, and Venice. They stayed at Venice for two months, in the hope that David would settle down to work. By this time he had realised that his wife was shallow and superficial, all her enthusiasms were froth bubbling on the stream. She was always flying off at a tangent, being carried away by some new mood or fashion, discovering some new genius. She became irritated that David did not produce new and interesting work. She tired a little of him, and he found her dull, and their days were filled with great emptiness.

In Venice he did no work, and one day he told her about the dingle. She listened apathetically, and did not seem to understand. When he had finished, she said:

"How peculiar! Now, my dear, we will go to Bordighera. My sister has a villa up in the hills, and she has written and offered to lend it me. Venice is too distracting. At Bordighera it is quiet, and oh, so restful! There you will feel constrained to work, my love."

They crossed the peninsula and took up their abode at the Villa Gasparri at Bordighera. It was indeed a glorious spot,

nestling in the hills, a garden overflowing with clematis, passion-flowers, and roses, and an avenue of cypresses pointing to the sea. For some days David enjoyed the garden, and he sat at the open window of his study, biting the end of his pen. And then the mood of remorse and dissatisfaction again assailed him. He wandered aimlessly about the country, and spoke bitterly. Laura sought other company, and had no difficulty in finding it along this gay and alluring coast. She left him to his own devices. One night at dinner he made another reference to the dingle, and she turned on him and said bitingly:

"Oh, that dingle! Why do you always talk of that dingle?"

And David pushed his plate away and walked out of the room and out of the villa. He walked bareheaded up into the hills. His heart overflowed with angry and disturbed feelings. He strode along quickly, and his breath came in little stabs between his nostrils. At length he returned and went straight into the salou, where Laura was arranging masses of blue delphinium in a tall vase. Without any preliminary explanation he bore down on her.

"I'll tell you why," he almost shouted. "In every man's life there is a dingle. Do you understand what I mean? A dingle, a dingle, a dingle! Some place that is just his and no other's. It's the environment he must have, or he's no good. You can't explain it; he can't explain it. It's what his soul demands, and nothing else will serve. It may be a room in a slum, a side-chapel in a cathedral, a clearing in a forest, a set of conditions, the touch of a friend's hands—almost anything it may be, but it must be just that. Nothing else is any good to him. One has to be loyal to one's dingle, or . . . one is finished!"

He picked up an embroidered mat from a side table, and scrunched it in his hand.

"I've not been true . . . I've deserted my dingle, and I'm lost!" He buried his face in his hands. "O God! we can't help it: we're made like that!"

By the door Laura turned. Her lips were white. She said quite calmly:

"You fool!"

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Five days later David Stroud arrived in London. He stayed the night at his old rooms in West Kensington. His face was drawn and thin, and dark rings encircled his eyes, but there was a buoyancy and hope about his bearing.

In the morning he awoke refreshed. He caught an early train to Moblesham-by-the-Mill. It was April, and little clusters of primroses peeped at him from the hedges. His heart was beating rapidly. Stella! Would she be in the dingle? Was she still there? Did she think of him? Would she understand? Could he ever get back to the old position?

At the turning where the lane forked he was disturbed to find a large red-brick house. He muttered curses on the activities of speculating builders, and plunged down the lane. He had not advanced two hundred yards when he suddenly stopped. He felt he was going to swoon. He staggered to a gate and supported himself. Beads of perspiration streamed down his face.

"It's finished," he said hoarsely. "Everything is finished!"

An iron gallery crossed the road. Great chimneys and cranes stood out against the sky. A wooden fence shut off what once had been the dingle. Above the top of it he could see a wilderness of corrugated iron and white chalk, smoke and corruption. A steam-navvy was puffing noisily, figures were coming and going, whilst standing out insolently at an angle to the road was a large slate-coloured board, on which was painted, "Ephraim Barnes & Co., Lime and Cement Merchants."

David clung to the gate. He had difficulty in getting his breath. An old woman who came hobbling down the lane stopped and said:

"Are you sick, mister? Is anything awry?"

He shook himself nervously and jerked out:

"No, no, thank you; it's all right."

"It's muggy for the time of year," remarked the old lady.

David was struggling to keep himself in hand. He controlled his voice as he replied:

"Yes. Can you tell me, madam, who lives at the red-brick house at the corner?"

She turned her old face in the direction he was looking, and answered:

"Ay, Mr. Barnes 'isself and 'is family lives there."

"Oh! Could you tell me . . . whom did Mr. Barnes marry?"

"Mr. Barnes? Oo—'e married old Dr. Parsons' daughter."

"Is—she—still—there?"

"Ay, she do that. She's expecting a child, they say. She's a hard woman, though."

Hard! Stella!

"How do you mean, she's hard?"

"Eh, they doan't like 'er about these parts. She's too quiet, sullen, bitter-like. She never talks to us cottage-folk, nor to no one else, they say. They say her made her good man make them lime-works in the dingle. Some whimsy or other. She's very queer-like. They say it's payin', though, hand over fist. 'E makes a lot of money, do Mr. Barnes."

"It's finished . . . it's all finished!" gasped David,

"Pardon, sir?"

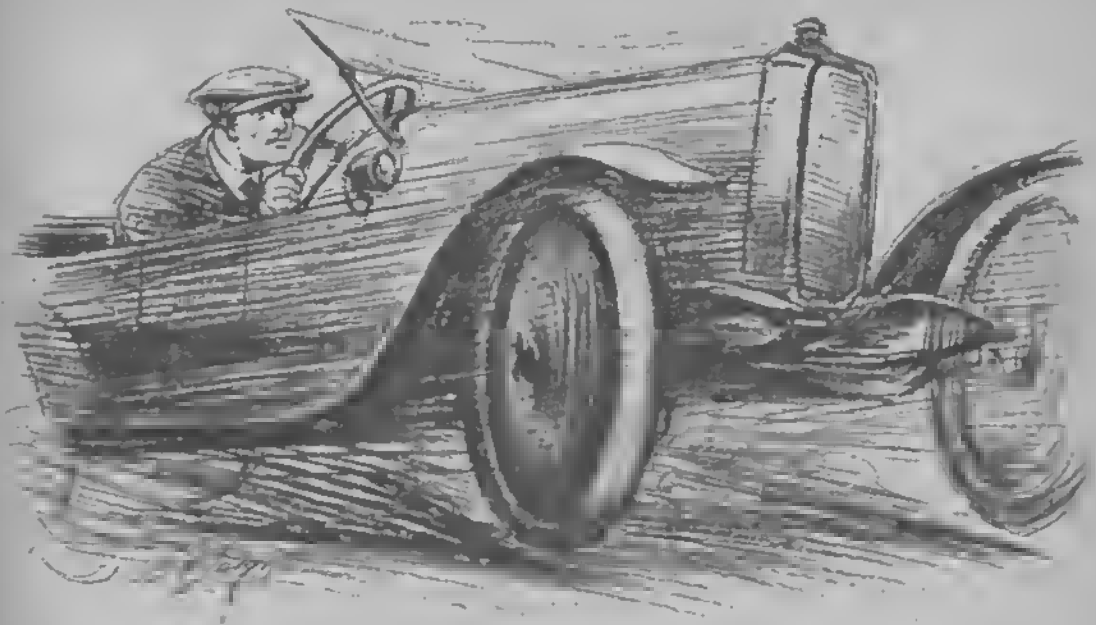
"It's all right. I beg your pardon. Thank you very much."

The strange young man lowered his head and walked rapidly away.

The old lady shook her head. "Drink, perhaps," she murmured. "A pleasant-looking young man, too."

But David was only speaking the truth. It was finished. So relentless are the gods who preside over these mysterious coming and goings that if you look through *Mudie's* or any publisher's trade-catalogue, you will find that no work by David Stroud has ever been published since *The Child's Pit* attained so conspicuous a success.

May. Annals



Bull-Dog Drummond, D.S.O., M.C.

Being the Adventures of a Demobilised Officer who found Peace dull

By "SAPPER" (Cyril McNeile)

INTRODUCTION

I

CAPTAIN HUGH DRUMMOND, D.S.O., M.C., late of His Majesty's Royal Loamshires, was whistling in his morning bath. Being by nature of a cheerful disposition, the symptom did not surprise his servant, late private of the same famous regiment, who was laying breakfast in an adjoining room.

After a while the whistling ceased, and the musical gurgle of escaping water announced that the concert was over. It was the signal for James Denny—the square-jawed ex-batman—to disappear to the back regions and get from his wife the kidneys and bacon which that most excellent woman had grilled to a turn. But on this particular morning the invariable routine was broken. James Denny seemed preoccupied, distraught.

Once or twice he scratched his head, and stared out of the window with a puzzled frown. And each time, after a brief survey of the other side of Half Moon Street, he

turned back again to the breakfast table with a grin.

"What's you looking for, James Denny?" The irate voice of his wife at the door made him look round guiltily. "Them kidneys is ready and waiting these five minutes."

Her eyes fell on the table, and she advanced into the room wiping her hands on her apron.

"Did you ever see such a bunch of letters?" she said.

"Forty-five," returned her husband grimly, "and more to come." He picked up the newspaper lying beside the chair and opened it out.

"Them's the result of that," he continued cryptically, indicating a paragraph with a square finger, and thrusting the paper under his wife's nose.

"Demobilised officer," she read slowly, "finding peace incredibly tedious, would welcome diversion. Legitimate, if possible; but crime, if of a comparatively humorous description, no objection. Excitement essential. Would be prepared to consider permanent job if suitably

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impressed by applicant for his services. Reply at once Box X10."

She put down the paper on a chair and stared first at her husband and then at the rows of letters neatly arranged on the table.

"I calls it wicked," she announced at length. "Fair flying in the face of Providence. Crime, Denny—crime. Don't you get 'aving nothing to do with such mad pranks, my man, or you and me will be having words." She shook an admonitory finger at him, and retired slowly to the kitchen. In the days of his youth James Denny had been a bit wild, and there was a look in his eyes this morning—the suspicion of a glint—which recalled old memories.

A moment or two later Hugh Drummond came in. Slightly under six feet in height, he was broad in proportion. His best friend would not have called him good-looking, but he was the fortunate possessor of that cheerful type of ugliness which inspires immediate confidence in its owner. His nose had never quite recovered from the final one year in the Public Schools Heavy Weights; his mouth was not small. In fact, to be strictly accurate, only his eyes redeemed his face from being what is known in the vernacular as the Frozen Limit.

Deep-set and steady, with eyelashes that many a woman had envied, they showed the man for what he was—a sportsman and a gentleman. And the combination of the two is an unbeatable production.

He paused as he got to the table and glanced at the rows of letters. His servant, pretending to busy himself at the other end of the room, was watching him surreptitiously, and noted the grin which slowly spread over Drummond's face as he picked up two or three and examined the envelopes.

"Who would have thought it, James?" he remarked at length. "Great Scot! I shall have to get a partner."

With disapproval showing in every line of her face, Mrs. Denny entered the room, carrying the kidneys, and Drummond glanced at her with a smile.

"Good morning, Mrs. Denny," he said.

"Wherefore this worried look on your face? Has that reprobate James been misbehaving himself?"

The worthy woman snorted. "He has not, sir—not yet, leastwise. And if so be that he does"—her eyes travelled up and down the back of the hapless Denny, who was quite unnecessarily pulling books off shelves and putting them back again—"if so be that he does," she continued grimly, "him and me will have words—as I've told him already this morning." She stalked from the room, after staring pointedly at the letters in Drummond's hand, and the two men looked at one another.

"It's that there reference to crime, sir, that's torn it," said Denny in a hoarse whisper.

"Thinks I'm going to lead you astray, does she, James?"

Hugh helped himself to bacon. "My dear fellow, she can think what she likes so long as she continues to grill bacon like this. Your wife is a treasure, James—a pearl amongst women: and you can tell her so with my love." He was opening the first envelope, and suddenly he looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. "Just to set her mind at rest," he remarked gravely, "you might tell her that, as far as I can see at present, I shall only undertake murder in exceptional cases."

He propped the letter up against the toast-rack and commenced his breakfast. "Don't go, James." With a slight frown he was studying the typewritten sheet. "I'm certain to want your advice before long. Though not over this one. . . . It does not appeal to me—not at all. To assist Messrs. Jones & Jones, whose business is to advance money on note of hand alone, to obtain fresh clients, is a form of amusement which leaves me cold. The waste-paper basket, please, James. Tear the effusion up and we will pass on to the next."

He looked at the mauve envelope doubtfully, and examined the postmark. "Where is Pudlington, James? and one might almost ask—why is Pudlington? No town has any right to such an offensive name." He glanced through the letter



He paused as he got to the table and glanced at the rows of letters.

and shook his head. "Tush! tush! And the wife of the bank manager too—the bank manager of Pudlington, James! Can you conceive of anything so dreadful? But I'm afraid Mrs. Bank Manager is a puss—a distinct puss. It's when they get on the soul-mate stunt that the furniture begins to fly."

Drummond tore up the letter and dropped the pieces into the basket beside him. Then he turned to his servant and handed him the remainder of the envelopes.

"Go through them, James, while I assault the kidneys, and pick two or three out for me. I see that you will have to

become my secretary. No man could tackle that little bunch alone."

"Do you want me to open them, sir?" asked Denny doubtfully.

"You've hit it, James—hit it in one. Classify them for me in groups. Criminal; sporting; amatory—that means of or pertaining to love; stupid and merely boring; and as a last resort, miscellaneous." He stirred his coffee thoughtfully. "I feel that as a first venture in our new career—ours, I said, James—love appeals to me irresistibly. Find me a damsel in distress; a beautiful girl, helpless in the clutches of knaves. Let me feel that

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I can fly to her succour, clad in my new grey suiting."

He finished the last piece of bacon and pushed away his plate. "Amongst all that mass of paper there must surely be one from a lovely maiden, James, at whose disposal I can place my rusty sword. Incidentally, what has become of the damned thing?"

"It's in the lumber-room, sir—tied up with the old umbrellas and the niblick you don't like."

"Great heavens! Is it?" Drummond helped himself to marmalade. "And to think that I once pictured myself skewering Huns with it. Do you think anybody would be mug enough to buy it, James?"

But that worthy was engrossed in a letter he had just opened, and apparently failed to hear the question. A perplexed look was spreading over his face, and suddenly he sucked his teeth loudly. It was a sure sign that James was excited, and though Drummond had almost cured him of this distressing habit, he occasionally forgot himself in moments of stress.

His master glanced up quickly, and removed the letter from his hands. "I'm surprised at you, James," he remarked severely. "A secretary should control himself. Don't forget that the perfect secretary is an it: an automatic machine—a thing incapable of feeling. . . ."

He read the letter through rapidly, and then, turning back to the beginning, he read it slowly through again.

"My dear Box Xro,—I don't know whether your advertisement was a joke: I suppose it must have been. But I read it this morning, and it's just possible, Xro, just possible, that you mean it. And if you do, you're the man I want. I can offer you excitement and probably crime.

"I'm up against it, Xro. For a girl I've bitten off rather more than I can chew. I want help—badly. Will you come to the Carlton for tea to-morrow afternoon? I want to have a look at you and see if I think you are genuine. Wear a white flower in your buttonhole."

Drummond laid the letter down, and

pulled out his cigarette-case. "To-morrow, James," he murmured. "That is to-day—this very afternoon. Verily I believe that we have impinged upon the goods." He rose and stood looking out of the window thoughtfully. "Go out, my trusty fellow, and buy me a daisy or a cauliflower or something white." "You think it's genuine, sir?" said James thoughtfully.

His master blew out a cloud of smoke. "I know it is," he answered dreamily. "Look at that writing; the decision in it—the character. She'll be medium height, and dark, with the sweetest little nose and mouth. Her colouring, James, will be——"

But James had discreetly left the room.

II

At four o'clock exactly Hugh Drummond stepped out of his two-seater at the Haymarket entrance to the Carlton. A white gardenia was in his buttonhole; his grey suit looked the last word in exclusive tailoring. For a few moments after entering the hotel he stood at the top of the stairs outside the dining-room, while his eyes travelled round the tables in the lounge below.

A brother-officer, evidently taking two country cousins round London, nodded resignedly; a woman at whose house he had danced several times smiled at him. But save for a courteous bow he took no notice; slowly and thoroughly he continued his search. It was early, of course, yet, and she might not have arrived, but he was taking no chances.

Suddenly his eyes ceased wandering, and remained fixed on a table at the far end of the lounge. Half hidden behind a plant a girl was seated alone, and for a moment she looked straight at him. Then with the faintest suspicion of a smile, she turned away, and commenced drumming on the table with her fingers.

The table next to her was unoccupied, and Drummond made his way towards it and sat down. It was characteristic of the man that he did not hesitate; having once made up his mind to go through

"Sapper" (Cyril McNeile)

coiled over her ears, from under a small black hat. He glanced at her feet—being an old stager: she was perfectly shod. He glanced at her hands, and noted, with approval, the absence of any ring. Then he looked once more at her face, and found her eyes were fixed on him.



She nodded as if satisfied. "Are you prepared to risk your life?"

with a thing, he was in the habit of going and looking neither to the right hand nor to the left. Which, incidentally, was how he got his D.S.O.; but that, as Kipling would say, is another story.

He felt not the slightest doubt in his mind that this was the girl who had written him, and, having given an order to the waiter, he started to study her face as unobtrusively as possible. He could only see the profile, but that was quite sufficient to make him bless the moment when more as a jest than anything else he had sent his advertisement to the paper.

Her eyes, he could see, were very blue; and great masses of golden brown hair

This time she did not look away. She seemed to think that it was her turn to conduct the examination, and Drummond turned to his tea while the scrutiny continued. He poured himself out a cup, and then fumbled in his waistcoat pocket. After a moment he found what he wanted, and taking out a card he propped it against the teapot so that the girl could see what was on it. In large block capitals he had written Box N10. Then he added milk and sugar and waited.

She spoke almost at once. "You'll do, N10," she said, and he turned to her with a smile.

"It's very nice of you to say so," he

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murmured. "If I may, I will return the compliment. So will you."

She frowned slightly. "This isn't foolishness, you know. What I said in my letter is literally true."

"Which makes the compliment even more returnable," he answered. "If I am to embark on a life of crime, I would sooner collaborate with you than—shall we say—that earnest eater over there with the tomato in her hat."

He waved vaguely at the lady in question and then held out his cigarette-case to the girl. "Turkish on this side—Virginian on that," he remarked. "And as I appear satisfactory, will you tell me who I'm to murder?"

With the unlighted cigarette held in her fingers she stared at him gravely. "I want you to tell me," she said at length, and there was no trace of jesting in her voice, "tell me, on your word of honour, whether that advertisement was *bona fide* or a joke."

He answered her in the same vein. "It started more or less as a joke. It may now be regarded as absolutely genuine."

She nodded as if satisfied. "Are you prepared to risk your life?"

Drummond's eyebrows went up and then he smiled. "Granted that the inducement is sufficient," he returned slowly, "I think that I may say that I am."

She nodded again. "You won't be asked to do it in order to obtain a half-penny bun," she remarked. "If you've a match, I would rather like a light."

Drummond apologised. "Our talk on trivialities engrossed me for the moment," he murmured. He held the lighted match for her, and as he did so he saw that she was staring over his shoulder at some one behind his back.

"Don't look round," she ordered, "and tell me your name quickly."

"Drummond—Captain Drummond, late of the Loamshires." He leaned back in his chair, and lit a cigarette himself.

"And are you going to Henley this year?" Her voice was a shade louder than before.

"I don't know," he answered casually.

"I may run down for a day possibly, but——"

"My dear Phyllis," said a voice behind his back, "this is a pleasant surprise. I had no idea that you were in London."

A tall, clean-shaven man stopped beside the table, throwing a keen glance at Drummond.

"The world is full of such surprises, isn't it?" answered the girl lightly. "I don't suppose you know Captain Drummond, do you? Mr. Lakington—art connoisseur and—er—collector."

The two men bowed slightly, and Mr. Lakington smiled. "I do not remember ever having heard my harmless pastimes more concisely described," he remarked suavely. "Are you interested in such matters?"

"Not very. I'm afraid," answered Drummond. "Just recently I have been rather too busy to pay much attention to art."

The other man smiled again, and it struck Hugh that rarely, if ever, had he seen such a cold, merciless face.

"Of course, you've been in France," Lakington murmured. "Unfortunately a bad heart kept me on this side of the water. One regrets it in many ways—regrets it immensely. Sometimes I cannot help thinking how wonderful it must have been to be able to kill without fear of consequences. There is art in killing, Captain Drummond—profound art. And as you know, Phyllis," he turned to the girl, "I have always been greatly attracted by anything requiring the artistic touch." He looked at his watch and sighed. "Alas! I must tear myself away. Are you returning home this evening?"

The girl, who had been glancing round the restaurant, shrugged her shoulders. "Probably," she answered. "I haven't quite decided. I might stop with Aunt Kate."

"Fortunate Aunt Kate." With a bow Lakington turned away, and through the glass Drummond watched him get his hat and stick from the cloak-room. Then he looked at the girl, and noticed that she had gone a little white.

"What's the matter, old thing?" he asked quickly. "Are you feeling faint?"

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She shook her head, and gradually the colour came back to her face. "I'm quite all right," she answered. "It gave me rather a shock that man finding us here."

"On the face of it, it seems a harmless occupation," said Hugh.

"On the face of it, perhaps," she said. "But that man doesn't deal with face values." With a short laugh she turned to Hugh. "You've stumbled right into the middle of it, my friend—rather sooner than I anticipated. That is one of the men you will probably have to kill, . . ."

Her companion lit another cigarette. "There is nothing like straightforward candour," he grinned. "Except that I disliked his face and his manner, I must admit that I saw nothing about him to necessitate my going to so much trouble. What is his particular worry?"

"First and foremost the brute wants to marry me," replied the girl.

"I loathe being obvious," said Hugh, "but I am not surprised."

"But it isn't that that matters," she went on. "I wouldn't marry him even to save my life." She looked at Drummond quietly. "Henry Lakington is the second most dangerous man in England."

"Only the second," murmured Hugh. "Then hadn't I better start my new career with the first?"

She looked at him in silence. "I suppose you think that I'm hysterical," she remarked after a while. "You're probably even wondering whether I'm all there."

Drummond flicked the ash from his cigarette, then he turned to her dispassionately. "You must admit," he remarked, "that up to now our conversation has hardly proceeded along conventional lines. I am a complete stranger to you; another man who is a complete stranger to me speaks to you while we're at tea. You inform me that I shall probably have to kill him in the near future. The statement is, I think you will agree, a trifle disconcerting."

The girl threw back her head and laughed freely. "You poor young man," she cried; "put that way it does sound

alarming." Then she grew serious again. "There's plenty of time for you to back out now if you like. Just call the waiter, and ask for my bill. We'll say goodbye, and the incident will finish."

She was looking at him gravely as she spoke, and it seemed to her companion that there was an appeal in the big blue eyes. And they were very big: and the face they were set in was very charming—especially at the angle it was tilted at, in the half-light of the room. Altogether, Drummond reflected, a most adorable girl. And adorable girls had always been a hobby of his. Probably Lakington possessed a letter of hers or something, and she wanted him to get it back. Of course he would, even if he had to thrash the swine to within an inch of his life.

"Well!" The girl's voice cut into his train of thought and he hurriedly pulled himself together.

"The last thing I want is for the incident to finish," he said fervently. "Why—it's only just begun."

"Then you'll help me?"

"That's what I'm here for." With a smile Drummond lit another cigarette. "Tell me all about it."

"The trouble," she began after a moment, "is that there is not very much to tell. At present it is largely guess-work, and guess-work without much of a clue. However, to start with, I had better tell you what sort of men you are up against. Firstly, Henry Lakington—the man who spoke to me. He was, I believe, one of the most brilliant scientists who has ever been up at Oxford. There was nothing, in his own line, which would not have been open to him, had he run straight. But he didn't. He deliberately chose to turn his brain to crime. Not vulgar, common sorts of crime—but the big things, calling for a master criminal. He has always had enough money to allow him to take his time over any coup—to perfect his details. And that's what he loves. He regards a crime as an ordinary man regards a complicated business deal—a thing to be looked at and studied from all angles, a thing to be treated as a mathematical problem. He is quite unscrupu-

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lous; he is only concerned in pitting himself against the world and winning."

"An engaging fellow," said Hugh. "What particular form of crime does he favour?"

"Anything that calls for brain, iron nerve, and refinement of detail," she answered. "Principally, up to date, burglary on a big scale, and murder."

"My dear soul!" said Hugh incredulously. "How can you be sure? And why don't you tell the police?"

She smiled wearily. "Because I've got no proof, and even if I had . . ." She gave a little shudder, and left her sentence unfinished. "But one day, my father and I were in his house, and, by accident, I got into a room I'd never been in before. It was a strange room, with two large safes let into the wall and steel bars over the skylight in the ceiling. There wasn't a window, and the floor seemed to be made of concrete. And the door was covered with curtains, and was heavy to move—almost as if it was steel or iron. On the desk in the middle of the room lay some miniatures, and, without thinking, I picked them up and looked at them. I happen to know something about miniatures, and, to my horror, I recognised them." She paused for a moment as a waiter went by their table.

"Do you remember the theft of the celebrated Vatican miniatures belonging to the Duke of Melbourne?"

Drummond nodded; he was beginning to feel interested.

"They were the ones I was holding in my hand," she said quietly. "I knew them at once from the description in the papers. And just as I was wondering what on earth to do, the man himself walked into the room."

"Awkward—deuced awkward." Drummond pressed out his cigarette and leaned forward expectantly. "What did he do?"

"Absolutely nothing," said the girl. "That's what made it so awful."

"'Admiring my treasures,' he remarked. 'Pretty things, aren't they?' I couldn't speak a word: I just put them back on the table."

"'Wonderful copies,' he went on, 'of the Duke of Melbourne's lost miniatures. I think they would deceive most people.'"

"'They deceived me,' I managed to get out."

"'Did they?' he said. 'The man who painted them will be flattered.'"

"All the time he was staring at me, a cold, merciless stare that seemed to freeze my brain. Then he went over to one of the safes and unlocked it. 'Come here, Miss Benton,' he said. 'There are a lot more—copies.'"

"I only looked inside for a moment, but I have never seen or thought of such a sight. Beautifully arranged on black velvet shelves were ropes of pearls, a gorgeous diamond tiara, and a whole heap of loose, uncut stones. And in one corner I caught a glimpse of the most wonderful gold chalice—just like the one for which Samuel Levy, the Jew moneylender, was still offering a reward. Then he shut the door and locked it, and again stared at me in silence."

"'All copies,' he said quietly, 'wonderful copies. And should you ever be tempted to think otherwise—ask your father, Miss Benton. Be warned by me: don't do anything foolish. Ask your father first.'"

"And did you?" asked Drummond.

She shuddered. "That very evening," she answered. "And Daddy flew into a frightful passion, and told me never to dare to meddle in things that didn't concern me again. Then gradually, as time went on, I realised that Lakington has some hold over Daddy—that he'd got my father in his power. Daddy—of all people—who wouldn't hurt a fly: the best and dearest man who ever breathed." Her hands were clenched, and her breast rose and fell stormily.

Drummond waited for her to compose herself before he spoke again. "You mentioned murder, too," he remarked.

She nodded. "I've got no proof," she said, "less even than over the burglaries. But there was a man called George Dringer and one evening, when Lakington was dining with us, I heard him discussing this man with Daddy."

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"'He's got to go,' said Lakington. 'He's dangerous!'"

"And then my father got up and closed the door; but I heard them arguing for half an hour. Three weeks later a coroner's jury found that George Dringer had committed suicide while temporarily insane. The same evening Daddy, for the first time in his life, went to bed the worse for drink."

The girl fell silent, and Drummond stared at the orchestra with troubled eyes. Things seemed to be rather deeper than he had anticipated.

"Then there was another case." She was speaking again. "Do you remember that man who was found dead in a railway-carriage at Oxhey station. He was an Italian—Giuseppe by name; and the jury brought in a verdict of death from natural causes. A month before he had an interview with Lakington which took place at our house: because the Italian, being a stranger, came to the wrong place, and Lakington happened to be with us at the time. The interview finished with a fearful quarrel." She turned to Drummond with a slight smile. "Not much evidence, is there? Only I *know* Lakington murdered him. I *know* it. You may think I'm fanciful—imagining things; you may think I'm exaggerating. I don't mind if you do—because you won't for long."

Drummond did not answer immediately. Against his saner judgment he was beginning to be profoundly impressed, and, at the moment, he did not quite know what to say. That the girl herself firmly believed in what she was telling him, he was certain; the point was how much of it was—as she herself expressed it—fanciful imagination.

"What about this other man?" he asked at length.

"I can tell you very little about him," she answered. "He came to The Elms—that is the name of Lakington's house—three months ago. He is about medium height and rather thick-set; clean-shaven, with thick brown hair flecked slightly with white. His forehead is broad, and his eyes are a sort of cold grey-blue. But it's his hands that terrify me. They're large and

white and utterly ruthless." She turned to him appealingly. "Oh! don't think I'm talking wildly," she implored. "He frightens me to death—that man: far, far worse than Lakington. He would stop at nothing to gain his ends, and even Lakington himself knows that Mr. Peterson is his master."

"Peterson!" murmured Drummond. "It seems quite a sound old English name."

The girl laughed scornfully. "Oh! the name is sound enough, if it was his real one. As it is, it's about as real as his daughter."

"There is a lady in the case, then?"

"By the name of Irma," said the girl briefly. "She lies on a sofa in the garden and yawns. She's no more English than that waiter."

A faint smile flickered over her companion's face; he had formed a fairly vivid mental picture of Irma. Then he grew serious again.

"And what is it that makes you think there's mischief ahead?" he asked abruptly.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "What the novelists call feminine intuition, I suppose," she answered. "That—and my father." She said the last words very low. "He hardly ever sleeps at night now; I hear him pacing up and down his room—hour after hour, hour after hour. Oh! it makes me mad. . . . Don't you understand? I've just got to find out what the trouble is. I've got to get him away from those devils, before he breaks down completely."

Drummond nodded, and looked away. The tears were bright in her eyes, and, like every Englishman, he detested a scene. While she had been speaking he had made up his mind what course to take, and now, having outsat everybody else, he decided that it was time for the interview to cease. Already an early diner was having a cocktail, while Lakington might return at any moment. And if there was anything in what she had told him, it struck him that it would be as well for that gentleman not to find them still together.

"I think," he said, "we'd better go. My address is 60A Half Moon Street; my

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telephone 1234 Mayfair. If anything happens, if ever you want me—at any hour of the day or night—ring me up or write. If I'm not in, leave a message with my servant Denny. He is absolutely reliable. The only other thing is your own address."

"The Larches, near Godalming," answered the girl, as they moved towards the door. "Oh! if you only knew the glorious relief of feeling one's got some one to turn to . . ." She looked at him with shining eyes, and Drummond felt his pulse quicken suddenly. Imagination or not, so far as her fears were concerned, the girl was one of the loveliest things he had ever seen.

"May I drop you anywhere?" he asked, as they stood on the pavement, but she shook her head.

"No, thank you. I'll go in that taxi." She gave the man an address, and stepped in, while Hugh stood bareheaded by the door.

"Don't forget," he said earnestly. "Any time of the day or night. And while I think of it—we're old friends. Can that be done? In case I come and stay, you see."

She thought for a moment and then nodded her head. "All right," she answered. "We've met a lot in London during the war."

With a grinding of gear wheels the taxi drove off, leaving Hugh with a vivid picture imprinted on his mind of blue eyes, and white teeth, and a skin like the bloom of a sun-kissed peach.

For a moment or two he stood staring after it, and then he walked across to his own car. With his mind still full of the interview he drove slowly along Piccadilly, while every now and then he smiled grimly to himself. Was the whole thing an elaborate hoax? Was the girl even now chuckling to herself at his gullibility? If so, the game had only just begun, and he had no objection to a few more rounds with such an opponent. A mere tea at the Carlton could hardly be the full extent of the jest. . . . And somehow deep down in his mind, he wondered whether it was a joke—whether, by some freak of fate, he had stumbled on one of those strange mys-

teries which up to date he had regarded as existing only in the realms of shilling shockers.

He turned into his rooms, and stood in front of the mantelpiece taking off his gloves. It was as he was about to lay them down on the table that an envelope caught his eye, addressed to him in an unknown handwriting. Mechanically he picked it up and opened it. Inside was a single half-sheet of notepaper, on which a few lines had been written in a small, neat hand.

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth, young man, than a capability to eat steak and onions, and a desire for adventure. I imagine that you possess both: and they are useful assets in the second locality mentioned by the poet. In Heaven, however, one never knows—especially with regard to the onions. Be careful."

Drummond stood motionless for a moment, with narrowed eyes. Then he leaned forward and pressed the bell.

"Who brought this note, James?" he said quietly, as his servant came into the room.

"A small boy, sir. Said I was to be sure and see you got it most particular." He unlocked a cupboard near the window and produced a tantalus. "Whisky, sir, or cocktail?"

"Whisky, I think, James." Hugh carefully folded the sheet of paper and placed it in his pocket. And his face as he took the drink from his man would have left no doubt in an onlooker's mind as to why, in the past, he had earned the name of "Bulldog" Drummond.

I

IN WHICH HE JOURNEYS TO GODALMING
AND THE GAME BEGINS

1

"I almost think, James, that I could top with another kilney." Drummond looked across the table at his servant, who was carefully arranging two or three dozen letters in groups. "Do you think it will cause a complete breakdown in the culinary arrangements? I've got a journey in front of me to-day, and I require a large breakfast."

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James Denny supplied the deficiency from a dish that was standing on an electric heater.

"Are you going for long, sir?" he ventured.

"I don't know, James. It all depends on circumstances. Which, when you come to think of it, is undoubtedly one of the most fatuous phrases in the English language. Is there anything in the world that doesn't depend on circumstances?"

"Will you be motoring, sir, or going by train?" asked James prosaically. Dialectical arguments did not appeal to him.

"By car," answered Drummond. "Py-jamas and a tooth-brush."

"You won't take evening clothes, sir?"

"No. I want my visit to appear unpremeditated, James, and if one goes about completely encased in boiled shirts, while pretending to be merely out for the afternoon, people have doubts as to one's intellect."

James digested this great thought in silence.

"Will you be going far, sir?" he asked at length, pouring out a second cup of coffee.

"To Godalming. A charming spot, I believe, though I've never been there. Charming inhabitants, too, James. The lady I met yesterday at the Carlton lives at Godalming."

"Indeed, sir," murmured James non-committally.

"You damned old humbug," laughed Drummond. "you know you're itching to know all about it. I had a very long and interesting talk with her, and one of two things emerges quite clearly from our conversation. Either, James, I am a congenital idiot, and don't know enough to come in out of the rain; or we've hit the goods. That is what I propose to find out by my little excursion. Either our legs, my friend, are being pulled till they will never resume their normal shape; or that advertisement has succeeded beyond our wildest dreams."

"There are a lot more answers in this morning, sir." Denny made a movement towards the letters he had been sorting. "One from a lovely widow with two children."

"Lovely," cried Drummond. "How forward of her!" He glanced at the letter and smiled. "Care, James, and accuracy are essential in a secretary. The misguided woman calls herself lonely, not lovely. She will remain so, as far as I am concerned, until the other matter is settled."

"Will it take long, sir, do you think?"

"To get it settled?" Drummond lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. "Listen, James, and I will outline the case. The maiden lives at a house called The Larches, near Godalming, with her papa. Not far away is another house called The Elms, owned by a gentleman of the name of Henry Lakington—a nasty man, James, with a nasty face—who was also at the Carlton yesterday afternoon for a short time. And now we come to the point. Miss Benton—that is the lady's name—accuses Mr. Lakington of being the complete IT in the criminal line. She went even so far as to say that he was the second most dangerous man in England."

"Indeed, sir. More coffee, sir?"

"Will nothing move you, James?" remarked his master plaintively. "This man murders people and does things like that, you know."

"Personally, sir, I prefer a picture-palace. But I suppose there ain't no accounting for 'obbies. May I clear away, sir?"

"No, James, not at present. Keep quite still while I go on, or I shall get it wrong. Three months ago there arrived at The Elms, the most dangerous man in England—the IT of ITS. This gentleman goes by the name of Peterson, and he owns a daughter. From what Miss Benton said, I have doubts about that daughter, James." He rose and strolled over to the window. "Grave doubts. However, to return to the point, it appears that some unpleasant conspiracy is being hatched by IT, the IT of ITS, and the doubtful daughter, into which Papa Benton has been unwillingly drawn. As far as I can make out, the suggestion is that I should unravel the tangled skein of crime and extricate papa."

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In a spasm of uncontrollable excitement James sucked his teeth. "Lumme, it wouldn't 'alf go on the movies, would it?" he remarked. "Better than them Red Indians and things."

"I fear, James, that you are not in the habit of spending your spare time at the British Museum, as I hoped," said Drummond. "And your brain doesn't work very quickly. The point is not whether this hideous affair is better than Red Indians and things—but whether it's genuine. Am I to battle with murderers, or shall I find a house-party roaring with laughter on the lawn?"

"As long as you laughs like 'ell yourself, sir, I don't see as 'ow it makes much odds," answered James philosophically.

"The first sensible remark you've made this morning," said his master hopefully. "I will go prepared to laugh."

He picked up a pipe from the mantel-piece, and proceeded to fill it, while James Denny still waited in silence.

"A lady may ring up to-day," Drummond continued. "Miss Benton, to be exact. Don't say where I've gone if she does; but take down any message, and wire it to me at Godalming Post Office. If by any chance you don't hear from me for three days, get in touch with Scotland Yard, and tell 'em where I've gone. That covers everything if it's genuine. If, on the other hand, it's a hoax, and the house-party is a good one, I shall probably want you to come down with my evening clothes and some more kit."

"Very good, sir. I will clean your small Colt revolver at once."

Hugh Drummond paused in the act of lighting his pipe, and a grin spread slowly over his face. "Excellent," he said. "And see if you can find that water-squirt pistol I used to have—a Son of a Gun they called it. That ought to raise a laugh, when I arrest the murderer with it."

II

The 30 h.p. two-seater made short work of the run to Godalming. Under the dickey seat behind lay a small bag, containing the bare necessities for the night;

and as Drummond thought of the two guns rolled up carefully in his pyjamas—the harmless toy and the wicked little automatic—he grinned gently to himself. The girl had not rung him up during the morning, and after a comfortable lunch at his club, he had started about three o'clock. The hedges, fresh with the glory of spring, flashed past; the smell of the country came sweet and fragrant on the air. There was a gentle warmth, a balminess in the day that made it good to be alive, and once or twice he sang under his breath through sheer lightheartedness of spirit. Surrounded by the peaceful beauty of the fields, with an occasional village half hidden by great trees from under which the tiny houses peeped out, it seemed impossible that crime could exist—laughable. Of course the thing was a hoax, an elaborate leg-pull, but being not guilty of any mental subterfuge, Hugh Drummond admitted to himself quite truly that he didn't care a damn if it was. Phyllis Benton was at liberty to continue the jest, wherever and whenever she liked. Phyllis Benton was a very nice girl, and very nice girls are permitted a lot of latitude.

A persistent honking behind aroused him from his reverie, and he pulled into the side of the road. Under normal circumstances he would have let his own car out, and as she could touch ninety with ease, he very rarely found himself passed. But this afternoon he felt disinclined to race; he wanted to go quietly and think. Blue eyes and that glorious colouring were a dangerous combination—distinctly dangerous. Most engrossing to a healthy bachelor's thoughts.

An open cream-coloured Rolls-Royce drew level, with five people on board, and he looked up as it passed. There were three people in the back—two men and a woman, and for a moment his eyes met those of the man nearest him. Then they drew ahead, and Drummond pulled up to avoid the thick cloud of dust.

With a slight frown he stared at the retreating car; he saw the man lean over and speak to the other man; he saw the other man look round. Then a bend in

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the road hid them from sight, and still frowning, Drummond pulled out his case and lit a cigarette. For the man whose eye he had caught as the Rolls went by was Henry Lakington. There was no mistaking that hard-lipped, cruel face.

Presumably, thought Hugh, the other two occupants were Mr. Peterson and the doubtful daughter, Irma; presumably they were returning to The Elms. And incidentally there seemed no pronounced reason why they shouldn't. But, somehow, the sudden appearance of Lakington had upset him; he felt irritable and annoyed. What little he had seen of the man he had not liked; he did not want to be reminded of him, especially just as he was thinking of Phyllis.

He watched the white dust-cloud rise over the hill in front as the car topped it; he watched it settle and drift away in the faint breeze. Then he let in his clutch and followed quite slowly in the big car's wake.

There had been two men in front—the driver and another, and he wondered idly if the latter was Mr. Benton. Probably not, he reflected, since Phyllis had said nothing about her father being in London. He accelerated up the hill and swung over the top; the next moment he braked hard and pulled up just in time. The Rolls, with the chauffeur peering into the bonnet, had stopped in such a position that it was impossible for him to get by.

The girl was still seated in the back of the car, also the passenger in front, but the two other men were standing in the middle apparently watching the chauffeur. After a while the one whom Drummond had recognised as Lakington came towards him.

"I'm so sorry," he began—and then stopped in surprise. "Why, surely it's Captain Drummond?"

Drummond nodded pleasantly. "The occupant of a car is hardly likely to change a mile, is he?" he remarked. "I'm afraid I forgot to wave as you went past, but I got your smile all right." He leant over his steering-wheel and lit a second cigarette. "Are you likely to be long?"

he asked; "because if so, I'll stop my engine."

The other man was now approaching casually, and Drummond regarded him curiously. "A friend of our little Phyllis, Peterson," said Lakington, as he came up. "I found them having tea together yesterday at the Carlton."

"Any friend of Miss Benton's is, I hope, ours," said Peterson with a smile. "You've known her a long time, I expect?"

"Quite a long time," returned Hugh. "We have jazzed together on many occasions."

"Which makes it all the more unfortunate that we should have delayed you," said Peterson. "I can't help thinking, Lakington, that that new chauffeur is a bit of a fool."

"I hope he avoided the crash all right," murmured Drummond politely.

Both men looked at him. "The crash!" said Lakington. "There was no question of a crash. We just stopped."

"Really," remarked Drummond. "I think, sir, that you must be right in your diagnosis of your chauffeur's mentality." He turned courteously to Peterson. "When something goes wrong, for a fellow to stop his car, by breaking so hard that he locks both back wheels, is no *bon*, as we used to say in France. I thought, judging by the tracks in the dust, that you must have been in imminent danger of ramming a traction engine. Or perhaps," he added judiciously, "a sudden order to stop would have produced the same effect." If he saw the lightning glance that passed between the two men he gave no sign. "May I offer you a cigarette? Turkish that side—Virginian the other. I wonder if I could help your man," he continued when they had helped themselves. "I'm a bit of an expert with a Rolls."

"How very kind of you," said Peterson. "I'll go and see." He went over to the man and spoke a few words.

"Isn't it extraordinary," remarked Hugh, "how the eye of the boss galvanises the average man into activity! As long, probably, as Mr. Peterson had remained here talking, that chauffeur would have gone on tinkering with the engine. And

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now—look, in a second—all serene. And yet I daresay Mr. Peterson knows nothing about it really. Just the watching eye, Mr. Lakington. Wonderful thing—the human optic.”

He rambled on with a genial smile, watching with apparent interest the car in front. “Who’s the quaint bird sitting beside the chauffeur? He appeals to me immensely. Wish to Heaven I’d had a few more like him in France to turn into snipers.”

“May I ask why you think he would have been a success at the job?” Lakington’s voice expressed merely perfunctory interest, but his cold, steely eyes were fixed on Drummond.

“He’s so motionless,” answered Hugh. “The bally fellow hasn’t moved a muscle since I’ve been here. I believe he’d sit on a hornet’s nest, and leave the inmates guessing. Great gift, Mr. Lakington. Shows a strength of will but rarely met with—a mind which rises above mere vulgar curiosity.”

“It is undoubtedly a great gift to have such a mind, Captain Drummond,” said Lakington. “And if it isn’t born in a man, he should most certainly try to cultivate it.” He pitched his cigarette away, and buttoned up his coat. “Shall we be seeing you this evening?”

Drummond shrugged his shoulders. “I’m the vaguest man that ever lived,” he said lightly. “I might be listening to nightingales in the country; or I might be consuming steak and onions preparatory to going to a night club. So long. . . . You must let me take you to Hector’s one night. Hope you don’t break down again so suddenly.”

He watched the Rolls-Royce start, but seemed in no hurry to follow suit. And his many friends, who were wont to regard Hugh Drummond as a mass of brawn not too plentifully supplied with brains, would have been puzzled had they seen the look of keen concentration on his face, as he stared along the white dusty road. He could not say why, but suddenly and very certainly the conviction had come to him, that this was no hoax and no leg-pull—but grim and sober reality. In his imagina-

tion he heard the sudden sharp order to stop the instant they were over the hill, so that Peterson might have a chance of inspecting him; in a flash of intuition he knew that these two men were no ordinary people, and that he was suspect. And as he slipped smoothly after the big car, now well out of sight, two thoughts were dominant in his mind. The first was that there was some mystery about the motionless, unnatural man who had sat beside the driver; the second was a distinct feeling of relief that his automatic was fully loaded.

III

At half-past five he stopped in front of Godalming Post Office. To his surprise the girl handed him a wire, and Hugh tore the yellow envelope open quickly. It was from Denny, and it was brief and to the point:

“Phone message received. AAA. Must see you Carlton tea day after to-morrow. Going Godalming now. AAA. Message ends.”

With a slight smile he noticed the military phraseology—Denny at one time in his career had been a signaller—and then he frowned. “Must see you.” She should—at once.

He turned to the girl and enquired the way to The Larches. It was about two miles, he gathered, on the Guildford road, and impossible to miss. A biggish house standing well back in its own grounds.

“Is it anywhere near a house called The Elms?” he asked.

“Next door, sir,” said the girl. “The gardens adjoin.”

He thanked her, and having torn up the telegram into small pieces, he got into his car. There was nothing for it, he had decided, but to drive boldly up to the house, and say that he had come to call on Miss Benton. He had never been a man who beat about the bush, and simple methods appealed to him—a trait in his character which many a boxer, addicted to tortuous cunning in the ring, had good cause to

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remember. What more natural, he reflected, than to drive over and see such an old friend?

He had no difficulty in finding the house, and a few minutes later he was ringing the front-door bell. It was answered by a maidservant, who looked at him in mild surprise. Young men in motor-cars were not common visitors at The Larches.

"Is Miss Benton in?" Hugh asked with a smile which at once won the girl's heart.

"She has only just come back from London, sir," she answered doubtfully. "I don't know whether . . ."

"Would you tell her that Captain Drummond has called?" said Hugh as the maid hesitated. "That I happened to find myself near here, and came on chance of seeing her?"

Once again the smile was called into play, and the girl hesitated no longer.

"Will you come inside, sir?" she said. "I will go and tell Miss Phyllis."

She ushered him into the drawing-room and closed the door. It was a charming room, just such as he would have expected with Phyllis. Big windows, opening down to the ground, led out on to a lawn, which was already a blaze of colour. A few great oak trees threw a pleasant shade at the end of the garden, and partially showing through them, he could see another house which he rightly assumed was The Elms. In fact, even as he heard the door open and shut behind him, he saw Peterson come out of a small summer-house and commence strolling up and down, smoking a cigar. Then he turned round and faced the girl.

Charming as she had looked in London, he was doubly so now, in a simple linen frock which showed off her figure to perfection. But if he thought he was going to have any leisure to enjoy the picture undisturbed, he was soon disillusioned.

"Why have you come here, Captain Drummond?" she said, a little breathlessly.

"I called the Carlton—the day after tomorrow."

"Unfortunately," said Hugh, "I'd left London before that message came. My servant wired it on to the Post Office

here. Not that it would have made any difference. I should have come, anyway."

An involuntary smile hovered round her lips for a moment; then she grew serious again. "It's very dangerous for you to come here," she remarked quietly. "If once those men suspect anything, God knows what will happen."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that it was too late to worry about that; then he changed his mind. "And what is there suspicious," he asked, "in an old friend who happens to be in the neighbourhood dropping in to call? Do you mind if I smoke?"

The girl beat her hands together. "My dear man," she cried, "you don't understand. You're judging those devils by your own standard. They suspect everything—and everybody."

"What a distressing habit," he murmured. "Is it chronic, or merely due to liver? I must send 'em a bottle of good salts. Wonderful thing—good salts. Never without some in France."

The girl looked at him resignedly. "You're hopeless," she remarked—"absolutely hopeless."

"Absolutely," agreed Hugh, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Wherefore your telephone message? What's the worry?"

She bit her lip and drummed with her fingers on the arm of her chair. "If I tell you," she said at length, "will you promise me, on your word of honour, that you won't go blundering into The Elms, or do anything foolish like that?"

"At the present moment I'm very comfortable where I am, thanks," remarked Hugh.

"I know," she said; "but I'm so dreadfully afraid that you're the type of person who . . . who . . ." She paused, at a loss for a word.

"Who bellows like a bull, and charges head down," interrupted Hugh with a grin. She laughed with him, and just for a moment their eyes met, and she read in his something quite foreign to the point at issue. In fact, it is to be feared that the question of Lakington and his companions was not engrossing Drummond's mind as

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it doubtless should have been, to the exclusion of all else.

"They're so utterly unscrupulous," she continued hurriedly, "so fiendishly clever, that even you would be like a child in their hands."

Hugh endeavoured to dissemble his pleasure at that little word "even," and only succeeded in frowning horribly.

"I will be discretion itself," he assured her firmly. "I promise you."

"I suppose I shall have to trust you," she said. "Have you seen the evening papers to-day?"

"I looked at the ones that come out in the morning labelled six p.m. before I had lunch," he answered. "Is there anything of interest?"

She handed him a copy of the *Planet*. "Read that little paragraph in the second column." She pointed to it, as he took the paper, and Hugh read it aloud.

"Mr. Hiram C. Potts—the celebrated

American millionaire—is progressing favourably. He has gone into the country for a few days, but is sufficiently recovered to conduct business as usual." He laid down the paper and looked at the girl sitting opposite. "One is pleased," he remarked in a puzzled tone, "for the sake of Mr. Potts. To be ill and have a name like that is more than most men could stand. . . . But I don't quite see . . ."

"That man was stopping at the Carlton, where he met Lakington," said the girl. "He is a multi-millionaire, over here in connection with some big steel trust; and when multi-millionaires get friendly with Lakington, their health frequently does suffer."

"But this paper says he's getting better," objected Drummond. "Sufficiently recovered to conduct business as usual." What's wrong with that?"

"If he is sufficiently recovered to conduct business as usual, why did he send



The man was dazed, semi-unconscious.

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his confidential secretary away yesterday morning on an urgent mission to Belfast?"

"Search me," said Hugh. "Incidentally, how do you know he did?"

"I asked at the Carlton this morning," she answered. "I said I'd come after a job as typist for Mr. Potts. They told me at the enquiry office that he was ill in bed and unable to see anybody. So I asked for his secretary, and they told me what I've just told you—that he had left for Belfast that morning and would be away several days. It may be that there's nothing in it; on the other hand, it may be that there's a lot. And it's only by

following up every possible clue," she continued fiercely, "that I can hope to beat those fiends and get Daddy out of their clutches."

Drummond nodded gravely, and did not speak. For into his mind had flashed suddenly the remembrance of that sinister, motionless figure seated by the chauffeur. The wildest guess-work certainly—no vestige of proof—and yet, having once come, the thought stuck. And as he turned it over in his mind, almost prepared to laugh at himself for his credulity—millionaires are not removed against their will, in broad daylight, from one of the biggest hotels in London, to sit in immovable silence in an open car—the door opened and an elderly man came in.

Hugh rose, and the girl introduced the two men. "An old friend, Daddy," she said. "You must have heard me speak of Captain Drummond."

"I don't recall the name at the moment, my dear," he answered courteously—a fact which was hardly surprising—but I fear I'm getting a little forgetful. I am pleased to meet you, Captain Drummond. You'll stop and have some dinner, of course."

Hugh bowed. "I should like to, Mr. Benton. Thank you very much. I'm afraid the hour of my call was a little informal, but being round in these parts, I felt I must come and look Miss Benton up."

His host smiled absentmindedly, and walking to the window, stared through the gathering dusk at the house opposite, half hidden in the trees. And Hugh, who was watching him from under lowered lids, saw him suddenly clench both hands in a gesture of despair.

It cannot be said that dinner was a meal of sparkling gaiety. Mr. Benton was palpably ill at ease, and beyond a few desultory remarks spoke hardly at all, while the girl, who sat opposite Hugh, though she made one or two valiant attempts to break the long silences, spent most of the meal in covertly watching her father. If anything more had been required to convince Drummond of the genuineness of his interview with her



He pulled the curtain aside.

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the Carlton the preceding day, the atmosphere at this strained and silent party supplied it.

As if unconscious of anything peculiar, he rambled on in his usual inconsequent method, heedless of whether he was answered or not; but all the time his mind was busily working. He had already decided that a Rolls-Royce was not the only car on the market which could break down mysteriously, and with the town so far away, his host could hardly fail to ask him to stop the night. And then—he had not yet quite settled how—he proposed to have a closer look at the Elms.

At length the meal was over, and the maid, placing the decanter in front of Mr. Benton, withdrew from the room.

"You'll have a glass of port, Captain Drummond," remarked his host, removing the stopper, and pushing the bottle towards him. "An old pre-war wine which I can vouch for."

Hugh smiled, and even as he lifted the heavy old cut glass, he stiffened suddenly in his chair. A cry—half shout, half scream, and stifled at once—had come echoing through the open windows. With a crash the stopper fell from Mr. Benton's nerveless fingers, breaking the finger-bowl in front of him, while every vestige of colour left his face.

"It's something these days to be able to say that," remarked Hugh, pouring himself out a glass. "Wine, Miss Benton?" He looked at the girl, who was staring fearfully out of the window, and forced her to meet his eye. "It will do you good."

His tone was compelling, and after a moment's hesitation, she pushed the glass over to him. "Will you pour it out?" she said, and he saw that she was trembling all over.

"Did you—did you hear—anything?" With a vain endeavour to speak calmly, his host looked at Hugh.

"That night-bird?" he answered easily. "Eerie noises they make, don't they? Sometimes in France, when everything was still, and only the ghostly green flares went hissing up, one used to hear

'em. Startled nervous sentries out of their lives." He talked on, and gradually the colour came back to the other man's face. But Hugh noticed that he drained his port at a gulp, and immediately refilled his glass. . . .

Outside everything was still; no repetition of that short, strangled cry again disturbed the silence. With the training bred of many hours in No Man's Land, Drummond was listening, even while he was speaking, for the faintest suspicious sound—but he heard nothing. The soft whispering night-noises came gently through the window; but the man who had screamed once did not even whimper again. He remembered hearing a similar cry near the brick-stacks at Guinchy, and two nights later he had found the giver of it, at the edge of a mine-crater, with glazed eyes that still held in them the horror of the final second. And more persistently than ever, his thoughts centred on the fifth occupant of the Rolls-Royce. . . .

It was with almost a look of relief that Mr. Benton listened to his tale of woe about his car.

"Of course you must stop here for the night," he cried. "Phyllis, my dear, will you tell them to get a room ready?"

With an inscrutable look at Hugh, in which thankfulness and apprehension seemed mingled, the girl left the room. There was an unnatural glitter in her father's eyes—a flush on his cheeks hardly to be accounted for by the warmth of the evening; and it struck Drummond that, during the time he had been pretending to look at his car, Mr. Benton had been fortifying himself. It was obvious, even to the soldier's unprofessional eye, that the man's nerves had gone to pieces; and that unless something was done soon, his daughter's worst forebodings were likely to be fulfilled. He talked disjointedly and fast; his hands were not steady, and he seemed to be always waiting for something to happen.

Hugh had not been in the room ten minutes before his host produced the whisky, and during the time that he took

to drink a mild nightcap, Mr. Benton succeeded in lowering three extremely strong glasses of spirit. And what made it the more sad was that the man was obviously not a heavy drinker by preference.

At eleven o'clock Hugh rose and said good night.

"You'll ring if you want anything, won't you?" said his host. "We don't have very many visitors here, but I hope you'll find everything you require. Breakfast at nine."

Drummond closed the door behind him, and stood for a moment in silence, looking round the hall. It was deserted, but he wanted to get the geography of the house firmly imprinted on his mind. Then a noise from the room he had just left made him frown sharply—his host was continuing the process of fortification—and he stepped across towards the drawing-room. Inside, as he hoped, he found the girl.

She rose the instant he came in, and stood by the mantelpiece with her hands locked.

"What was it?" she half whispered—"that awful noise at dinner?"

He looked at her gravely for a while, and then he shook his head. "Shall we leave it as a night-bird for the present?" he said quietly. Then he leaned towards her, and took her hands in his own. "Go to bed, little girl," he ordered; "this is my show. And, may I say, I think you're just wonderful. Thank God you saw my advertisement!"

Gently he released her hands, and walking to the door, held it open for her. "If by any chance you should hear things in the night—turn over and go to sleep again."

"But what are you going to do?" she cried.

Hugh grinned. "I haven't the remotest idea," he answered. "Doubtless the Lord will provide."

The instant the girl had left the room Hugh switched on the lights, and stepped to the curtains which covered the big windows. He pulled them aside, letting them come together behind him;

then, cautiously, he unbolted one side of the big centre window. The night was dark, and the moon was not due to rise for two or three hours, but he was too old a soldier to neglect any precautions. He wanted to see more of The Elms and its inhabitants; he did not want them to see more of him.

Silently he dodged across the lawn towards the big trees at the end, and leaning up against one of them, he proceeded to make a more detailed survey of his objective. It was the same type of house as the one he had just left, and the grounds seemed about the same size. A wire fence separated the two places, and in the darkness Hugh could just make out a small wicket-gate, closing a path which connected both houses. He tried it, and found to his satisfaction that it opened silently.

Passing through, he took cover behind some bushes from which he could command a better view of Mr. Lakington's abode. Save for one room on the ground-floor the house was in darkness, and Hugh determined to have a look at that room. There was a chink in the curtains, through which the light was streaming out, which struck him as having possibilities.

Keeping under cover, he edged towards it, and, at length, he got into a position from which he could see inside. And what he saw made him decide to chance it, and go even closer.

Seated at the table was a man he did not recognise; while on either side of him sat Lakington and Peterson. Lying on a sofa smoking a cigarette and reading a novel was a tall dark girl, who seemed completely uninterested in the proceedings of the other three. Hugh placed her at once as the doubtful daughter Irma, and resumed his watch on the group at the table.

A paper was in front of the man, and Peterson, who was smoking a large cigar, was apparently suggesting that he should make use of the pen which Lakington was obligingly holding in readiness. In all respects a humdrum tableau, save for one small thing—the expression on the

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man's face. Hugh had seen it before often—only then it had been called shell-shock. The man was dazed, semi-unconscious. Every now and then he stared round the room, as if bewildered; then he would shake his head and pass his hand wearily over his forehead. For a quarter of an hour the scene continued; then Lakington produced an instrument from his pocket. Hugh saw the man shrink back in terror, and reach for the pen. He saw the girl lie back on the sofa as if disappointed and pick up her novel again; and he saw Lakington's face set in a cold sneer. But what impressed him most in that momentary flash of action was Peterson. There was something inhuman in his complete passivity. By not the fraction of a second did he alter the rate at which he was smoking—the slow, leisurely rate of the connoisseur; by not the twitch of an eyelid did his expression change. Even as he watched the man signing his name, no trace of emotion showed on his face—whereas on Lakington's there shone a fiendish satisfaction.

The document was still lying on the table, when Hugh produced his revolver. He knew there was foul play about, and the madness of what he had suddenly made up his mind to do never struck him: being that manner of fool, he was made that way. But he breathed a pious prayer that he would shoot straight—and then he held his breath. The crack of the shot and the bursting of the only electric-light bulb in the room were almost simultaneous; and the next second, with a roar of "Come on, boys," he burst through the window. At an immense advantage over the others, who could see nothing for the moment, he blundered round the room. He timed the blow at Lakington to a nicety: he hit him straight on the point of the jaw and he felt the man go down like a log. Then he grabbed at the paper on the table, which tore in his hand, and picking the dazed signer up bodily, he rushed through the window on to the lawn. There was not an instant to be lost; only the impossibility of seeing when suddenly plunged into darkness, had enabled him to pull the thing off so far. And before that advan-

tage disappeared he had to be back at The Larches with his burden, no light weight for even a man of his strength to carry.

But there seemed to be no pursuit, no hue and cry. As he reached the little gate he paused and looked back, and he fancied he saw outside the window a gleam of white, such as a shirt-front. He lingered for an instant, peering into the darkness and recovering his breath, when with a vicious phut something buried itself in the tree beside him. Drummond lingered no more; long years of experience left no doubt in his mind as to what that something was.

"Compressed-air rifle—or electric," he muttered to himself, stumbling on, and half dragging, half carrying his dazed companion.

He was not very clear in his own mind what to do next, but the matter was settled for him unexpectedly. Barely had he got into the drawing-room, when the door opened and the girl rushed in.

"Get him away at once," she cried. "In your car. . . . Don't waste a second. I've started her up."

"Good girl," he cried enthusiastically. "But what about you?"

She stamped her foot impatiently. "I'm all right—absolutely all right. Get him away—that's all that matters."

Drummond grinned. "The humorous thing is that I haven't an idea who the bird is—except that—" He paused, with his eyes fixed on the man's left thumb. The top joint was crushed into a red, shapeless pulp, and suddenly the meaning of the instrument Lakington had produced from his pocket became clear. Also the reason of that dreadful cry at dinner. . . .

"By God!" whispered Drummond half to himself, while his jaws set like a steel vice. "A thumbscrew. The devils . . . the bloody swine . . ."

"Oh! quick, quick," the girl urged in an agony. "They may be here at any moment." She dragged him to the door, and together they forced the man into the car.

"Lakington won't," said Hugh with a grin. "And if you see him to-morrow—"



"Oh! quick, quick," the girl urged in an agony.

don't ask after his jaw. . . . Good night, Phyllis."

With a quick movement he raised her hand to his lips; then he slipped in the clutch and the car disappeared down the drive. . . .

He felt a sense of elation and of triumph at having won the first round, and as the car whirled back to London through the cool night air his heart was singing with the joy of action. And it was perhaps as well for his peace of mind that he did not witness the scene in the room at The Elms.

Langton still lay motionless on the

floor; Peterson's cigar still glowed steadily in the darkness. It was hard to believe that he had ever moved from the table; only the bullet imbedded in a tree proved that somebody must have got busy. Of course, it might have been the girl, who was just lighting another cigarette from the stump of the old one.

At length Peterson spoke. "A young man of dash and temperament," he said genially. "It will be a pity to lose him."

"Why not keep him and lose the girl?" yawned Irma. "I think he might amuse me——"

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"We have always our dear Henry to consider," answered Peterson. "Apparently the girl appeals to him. I'm afraid, Irma, he'll have to go . . . and at once. . . ."

The speaker was tapping his left knee softly with his hand; save for that slight

movement he sat as if nothing had happened. And yet ten minutes before a carefully planned coup had failed at the instant of success. Even his most fearless accomplices had been known to confess that Peterson's inhuman calmness sent cold shivers down their backs.

Sapper (Gail Wale.)

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The Jewel- Seller

By KATHLYN RHODES

Author of "The Lure of the Desert," "The Desert Dreamers," etc., etc.

(Over a million copies of Kathlyn Rhodes's novels have been sold)

ON a warm afternoon in February Dr. Alec Caird was strolling through the Mousky in Cairo, his quick eyes roaming from side to side with an alertness of interest in all he saw which was at variance with his slow, almost languid footsteps.

He had been in Cairo a week, having broken his journey home from India for the purpose; and he was already regretting the fact that his passage was booked in the Orient boat which was due to sail from Port Said on the following evening. For, all said and done, Cairo was a fascinating city. Critics might jeer at it as a poor imitation of a French town, travellers might talk contemptuously about the "Near East," pretending there was nothing Oriental about the place, but for all that there was an allure in Cairo which, to a sensitive man, at least, was charged with delicious, tantalizing mystery and enchantment. And Dr. Caird, for all his Scotch shrewdness,

the hard-headedness which is typically Northern, was strangely sensitive to impression. That was why he found such delight in strolling through the bazaars, studying the types he saw on every hand with the trained interest of the psychologist and the more romantic curiosity of the idealist.

Particularly was he interested in the goldsmiths, plying their trade with the most delicate of tools, the most deft of fingers; and in the jewellers, those hungry spiders who spun webs of the loveliest jewels, iridescent and sparkling, with which to entice the rich flies who visited their unpretentious booths.

For the last three days, indeed, Dr. Caird had been in negotiation with old Hussein-ben-Hassan for the purchase of a ring, a great green emerald set in a most delicious claw-setting of the finest gold, which he had set his heart on presenting to his mother, a month hence, on the occasion

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of her golden wedding. And although the price was still beyond his means, he was not without hope that a satisfactory bargain might be driven after all.

As he entered Hussein's shop this afternoon the jewel-seller came towards him with an eagerness which yet held no hint of servility; and Caird began to hope that the old villain was about to accede to his terms—a hope which was quickly dispelled by Hussein's first words, spoken in ungrammatical French.

"I am honoured, *M'sieu*, by your visit. You desire the emerald, is it not? But *hélas*, *M'sieu*, another customer, won by the green fire of the jewel, is willing to give poor Hussein his price! And unless *M'sieu* see his way to paying the paltry sum——" He raised deprecating shoulders, shooting keen glances out of his eye-corners at the prospective customer the while.

Caird, uncertain whether this was mere bluff, hesitated; and as he did so a second Arab came forward from the dark recesses of the shop and placed a small object in Hussein's hand, retiring as swiftly as he had advanced. Hussein himself wore the shabby frock-coat and red turban of so-called civilisation, but the second merchant was clothed in flowing robes, a turban bound round his head; and as Caird looked, idly enough, at the man, his quick eyes caught sight of a strange little scar, in shape like a miniature horseshoe, on the forehead beneath the edge of the folded turban. Almost as though the Arab resented his scrutiny, he raised his hand and dragged the folds of drapery lower, so as to conceal the scar completely, and at the same time a flash of something not unlike rage shone out of his dark eyes with strangely disconcerting effect.

The whole incident occupied less than ten seconds, yet it was unconsciously stored away in Caird's retentive memory, though it was most certainly of no importance whatever.

As the second Arab retired, Hussein opened his hand to display another ring, scarcely less effective than the first, save that in this case the emerald was a trifle smaller and round instead of square.

"My assistant, Mahomet-ben-Hadj,

think this ring may suit *M'sieu's* purpose." He spoke glibly, still shooting those keen glances at the other's face. "It is a little cheaper than the first—a matter of fifty francs only—but it is of almost equal beauty, *n'est-ce pas, M'sieu?*"

"H'm, yes, it's not bad." He was careful not to express the admiration he really felt. "But I'd rather have the square one. Come, Hussein, you know you're charging exorbitantly for the thing. Let me have it at the price I offer, three hundred francs, and we shall both be satisfied."

The jewel-seller uttered a cry of protest.

"Mash'allah, but the *hakim* possesses the instinct of a Jew!" He had already made himself acquainted with the status of his would-be customer. "I am a poor man, *M'sieu*, but to make so miserable a bargain would turn my few hairs white with shame. Nay, *M'sieu*, rather would I give you the ring! Take it, *M'sieu*, and know that the despised seller of jewels is a man of generosity indeed!"

He held out the ring in his open palm with a magnificent gesture; but Caird laughed and shook his head.

"No, Hussein, nothing doing. Perhaps after all I'd better leave the thing alone. I can get what I require in Paris on my way home at least fifty per cent. cheaper!"

He spoke convincingly, and the merchant's eyes began to shine with cupidity. It was true he had a second customer in view, but there was many a slip 'twixt cup and lip; and maybe it were better to sell to this tall, lean Roumi with the sharp eyes and the pockets stuffed with gold.

"For four hundred francs the ring is *M'sieu's*." He spoke with an air of complete magnanimity; and Caird, who had not expected to get the beautiful thing under sixteen pounds, pretended to consider the question for a moment; after which he shrugged his shoulders in imitation of the other man's habitual gesture, and signified his willingness to be thus robbed of his hard-earned money.

The transaction completed, it was inevitable he should partake of a cup of coffee with his late adversary in the dark

of words, and the pair retreated to a dim corner of the little shop where, half hidden by a screen of priceless meshribyeh work, they squatted on low stools and gravely sipped the mastic-scented coffee in token of friendship.

Barely was the ceremonial rite begun before two prospective customers entered the little place, and with a muttered word of apology to his guest Hussein went forward, bowing, to greet the pair.

He spoke in French, as usual, and Caird perforce gathered that this was the man who had expressed a desire to purchase the square emerald ring. After a rapid explanation of the sale, Hussein produced the second ring; and as the two examined it, their heads nearly touching in their eagerness, Caird observed them idly: more from habit—the habit of observation—than from any real curiosity.

He had seen the girl before, passing in and out of Shepherd's, where he himself was staying, and he had taken notice of her on three separate counts: one, her extreme youth; two, her real though rather fragile prettiness; and three, her look of fear as exemplified by the timid glances which she habitually cast from side to side, as though she lived in a state of constant apprehension. Even to-day, as she stood beside the good-looking, well-built youth who had brought her in, she did not lose her look of timidity, and Caird's eyes narrowed as he noted the little nervous movements with which she fingered the beautiful ring.

It was evident that the man wished to buy her the jewel, and equally evident that she longed to possess it, yet for some reason hardly dared to sanction the gift; and Caird found himself speculating as to what could be the inner significance of her reluctance to appropriate the jewel.

Lack of money was apparently not the reason, for the man made no attempt to cheapen the bargain. Yet the girl hesitated so long that at last Hussein, with a clever assumption of indifference, turned away and began to rummage among a heap of loose stones laid out in small saucers on an enamel table, as though the transaction had ceased to interest him.

As he did so, Caird, sitting in his dark

corner hidden from sight, heard a hurried whisper from the man which still further intrigued his awakening curiosity.

"Try it, darling; quick, take off that beastly wedding ring—just for a moment—to please me—and put on this one instead!"

With a swift movement the girl obeyed; and, putting the discarded ring into the little silver bag she carried, slipped the emerald on to her slim finger in its place. It seemed a matter of some difficulty to get it on, for the ring was of an unusually small size, but she persevered, and finally it flashed triumphantly on her hand. At the same moment Caird heard a quick gasp beside him, and, turning hastily, saw the Arab assistant craning forward from his stool in his dark corner, his fierce eyes blazing upon the pair with a veritable fire of mingled triumph and fury. So startling was the sight that Caird himself uttered an involuntary exclamation, whereon the Arab rose from his stool and retired into some still more mysterious recess in the shadowy little shop.

A moment later the jewel merchant was recalled, and the transaction concluded with the payment of a goodly number of English sovereigns, those wonderful pieces of gold which, before the days of the great war, carried their value all over the civilised world. To Caird's relief the offer of coffee was replaced by a gift of cigarettes and Turkish Delight, after which the two left the shop, followed by bows and compliments from the gratified Hussein.

A few moments later Caird too departed, and, finding the afternoon was yet young, he called an *arabeah* and had himself driven out to the Ghezireh Palace Hotel, with a pleasant feeling in his heart that his present would delight his handsome, white-haired mother, still a gracious and dignified figure for all her sixty-nine years.

He was interested, while lazily enjoying his tea on the terrace, to observe the couple of the ring episode sitting at a small table not very far from his own, and he could not help noticing two facts about the pair—one being that they were quite evidently oblivious of all save themselves, and the other that while the girl's left hand was still ornamented with the beautiful emerald

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ring, there was no trace of the narrow band of gold which would surely have proclaimed her status to the world.

Well, it was no business of his. They were a well-matched pair, in appearance at least; and though the affair in the *Bazar* seemed to point to the presence—in the background—of a husband, possibly there were extenuating circumstances which made this *tête-à-tête* not only excusable, but innocuous.

When, an hour later, Caird rose and strolled away over the marvellously kept green turf, the young couple were still lingering at their table, though the girl had glanced more than once at the little gold watch on her wrist, as though conscious that time was not standing still.

When, later, he entered Shepherd's, all thought of the lovers had vanished from Caird's mind, occupied, truth to tell, with pleasant anticipations of an excellent dinner by and by.

Yet he was to meet one of them again, in circumstances which would impress the meeting indelibly on his memory.

As Caird was dressing, leisurely, for dinner, he heard a hurried knock on the door of his adjoining sitting-room, and called out a summons which went disregarded. A second later the knock was repeated, still more hurriedly; and since another invitation proved fruitless, Caird slipped on his coat and went to see who thus sought admittance.

He opened the door rather brusquely, expecting to find some apologetic waiter or servant, but the vision which confronted him on the threshold made him begin to wonder if he were in a dream.

For his importunate visitor was a woman—a woman dressed in a wonderful frock of foamy white chiffon, half concealed by the satin wrap she held round her with a shaking hand. Her fair hair shone like a golden halo round her delicate and frightened face, and it was evident she was labouring under some tremendous excitement which deprived her of self-control and made her lips tremble almost too much for speech.

Obviously the first thing to do was to

reassure her, if she were to state the object of her visit, and since the corridor of the hotel was a public lounging-place, it was equally obvious that she must be invited into the room before disclosing that object.

When he spoke, his voice was carefully modulated to inspire confidence.

"You want to speak to me? Well, won't you come inside and sit down?" He held the door open as he spoke, and invited her to enter with a gesture which induced compliance.

She entered accordingly, and as she let her satin wrap slip on to a chair beside her, his eyes were riveted, instantly, to the small left hand, whereon an emerald flashed and glowed, a veritable point of green and translucent fire.

Instantly the same quick eyes sought her face, and what had hitherto been a suspicion became a certainty. His visitor was the girl of the jewel-seller's shop; and although at the first glance he had not been sure of her identity, so different was her appearance without a hat, he recognised her now with unfailing sureness.

But why did she seek him, of all people? And what had been the shock which had driven the blood from her cheeks, the strength from her limbs? It was obvious that she was on the verge of collapse, and with a tinge of professionalism in his manner he laid one hand on her bare shoulder and gently pressed her down into the chair beside which she stood.

"Sit down and compose yourself," he said quietly; "then you will be able to tell me what I can do for you. Perhaps you would like a glass of water."

"No, no!" Her voice arrested him as he was moving away. "I'm perfectly well—I don't want water. Only—you're a doctor, aren't you? They told me so—downstairs."

"Yes. I'm a doctor. Is some one ill that you come to me?"

"No." For a moment she sat motionless, though her clenched hands and set lips betrayed her emotion. Then suddenly she spoke, vehemently.

"I want you to do something for me, please. It—it's not much. It's only"—in spite of herself she flushed and paled—

"it's only to help me to get this ring off my finger."

And she held out her hand, on whose whiteness the emerald glowed greenly, in mute appeal.

In spite of himself Caird started. The request was unusual, and from the girl's tense manner he gathered that his compliance was a matter of the highest importance to her.

Without replying he took the small hand in his and scrutinised the slim finger on which the emerald shone with a fire which held, surely, something almost baleful in its green flame. It was evident that its presence there was a menace of some sort, and although he could not help feeling that she was exaggerating the whole affair, he could not quite rid himself of a fancy that the emerald ring held something sinister even in its beauty.

"You have tried to get it off yourself?" He touched her finger gently. "It is really impossible for you to do it?"

"Quite, quite impossible!" Her tone carried conviction. "You see, even when I put it on this afternoon in a shop in the Bazar——"

"She broke off, biting her lip. "You bought it to-day?" He was trying to put her at her ease, and spoke with head bent over her hand. "Oddly enough I bought an emerald ring to-day from old Hussain. He is a regular villain, but he has some splendid jewels."

"Then—was it you who bought the other ring—the one with the square emerald?" For a moment she spoke more naturally.

"Yes. I wanted it for my mother." He was trying, gently, to ease the ring as he spoke. "I say, it is a tight fit! How on earth did you get it on?"

"She hesitated. "Well, I—I jammed it on somehow. It hurt rather, but I was so keen on wearing it—the faltered a little—" and then, when I wanted to get it off, it simply wouldn't come!"

"You know your finger is quite swollen with all your pushing and pulling at it!" The slim digit was indeed inflamed round the ring. "You've tried soap—yes? Well, honestly, I think, unless it's very important, you'd do well to leave it for

a few hours till your finger gets cool and normal again. Then I think we might get it off without much trouble."

Instantly she was all aflame.

"No—I can't do that! I *must* get it off—I must! Really and truly, it must come off—if you have to chop my finger off as well!"

She was again pulling frantically at the gold circlet, and it was plain to see her nerves were giving way. For some as yet unexplained reason she found it imperative that the ring should be removed, and suddenly Caird remembered the fact that she had taken off her wedding ring in order to put on this other trinket. . . .

He spoke quietly.

"Don't inflame your finger any more. You're staying in the hotel, aren't you, Miss—er——" He hesitated purposely, but she did not speak. "Shall I come along presently and see what I can do?"

"Oh, no, no!" She spoke vehemently. "You mustn't do that! But—oh, can't you please do something—anything—to help me? It—it's almost a matter of life and death!"

"I'll try." He had decided that curiosity must wait. "We'll experiment with a bit of cotton, and if that fails, well, there's one expedient left, but it's a desperate one!"

"What's that?" The question shot out sharply.

"I'll have to file it off. But we'll try less heroic measures first. Just sit back quietly, and let me see what I can do."

She obeyed, and for nearly a quarter of an hour he laboured, trying his very hardest to solve the problem of sliding the ring over the slender finger which yet, slender as it was, proved too large for the small circle around it. As the time went on he could hear her breath coming quickly, and when at length the clock on the mantelpiece struck the half-hour after seven, she broke out into a wailing cry which betokened her to be on the very edge of a breakdown.

"Oh, can't you—can't you get it off? If you can't—oh, cut my finger off—anything! I can't—I *can't* face my husband with this ring on my hand!"

For a moment he ceased his endeavours,

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bending his keen eyes on her face with a closeness of scrutiny beneath which she turned ashy pale.

"Your husband? See here, Mrs.—I don't know your name yet, but didn't I see you in Hussein's shop this afternoon with a tall, blue-eyed chap—"

"Yes, yes!" She interrupted him hysterically. "It was my—my friend who bought me this ring. Oh, it was only as a souvenir. We were engaged once, you know—three years ago; and when my father made me marry Sir Peter"—she bit her lip, then hurried on as though she had decided concealment were useless—"Sir Peter Clinton, why, I had to break off with Hugh, and I've never seen him since, till three days ago when we met, by chance, in the street here in Cairo."

"And I gather you don't want your husband to inquire into the history of this ring, Lady Clinton?" Although his fingers, busy with the ring, were gentle as ever, there was a hint of cynicism in his tone which cut the girl to the heart.

"Oh, you are condemning me—of course!" Her voice had tears in it. "Every one would, I suppose, unless they knew everything. But—God only knows what I've had to bear! To marry a child of seventeen to that man—" She shuddered so violently that her hand shook in his. "Why, he laughed at me on our wedding day; jeered me because my father had sold me to him to pay his debts; and he—he took me because I was young, and he couldn't hope to get a decent woman any other way!"

"Lady Clinton, don't talk so—you're upsetting yourself."

"Oh, you don't know what it means—a marriage like mine!" She spoke impetuously, the words bursting forth in a quick torrent. "If I looked at another man—the merest passing glance—my husband reviled me. He was wildly, insanely jealous of me—not because he loved me, but because I was his. I couldn't speak to the most casual acquaintance without finding him at my elbow, and he made my life one long-drawn-out insult. . . ."

She broke off, her breast heaving, but before he could speak she was off again.

"Four days ago he left me here, suddenly, to go to Alexandria for a week on what he called business. At first I thought it was only pretence, that he was pretending to go so that he could spy on me, and catch me doing something he could punish me for; and then, when I found he had really gone, I felt like a bird let out of a cage. I wanted to dance, to sing, to do anything, however absurd, to mark my freedom. And then"—her voice changed—"three days ago I met—Hugh."

"And you let him take you about?"

"Yes." In her tone were mingled terror and defiance. "He is leaving Cairo to-morrow, and to-day we were to pretend, just for once, that we were engaged again—that all my life since my marriage had been only a dreadful dream. I was to wear this ring instead of my hateful wedding ring, and we were to go out to Mena House to-night to have dinner and look at the Sphinx by moonlight. . . ."

"Well? What interfered with your programme?" Unnoticed by the girl he had succeeded at last in moving the ring a fraction. "Has your husband returned?"

"Yes. At least he sent me a message saying he would be with me to dinner at eight." She spoke drearily, the fire gone from her manner. "He thinks—Hugh—that he must have learnt of our meeting and returned on purpose. But I don't see how he can have done. Until to-day we have been so careful."

She sighed, looking at his down-bent head as he wrestled with the ring, with an air of indescribable sorrow.

"Well, I'm glad you came to me." He spoke briskly. "I really believe we're going to get the thing off. Yes—it's coming. . . . I'm afraid I'm hurting you abominably, but it can't be helped."

"You're awfully gentle, and I don't mind being hurt"—she spoke with a new vivacity—"if you can get it off. I—simply daren't face my husband without my wedding ring. I think—I think he would kill me if he saw this emerald on my hand. And yet"—suddenly she looked very young and wan—"it was all so harmless: only a little bit of folly at the worst!"

"Unfortunately one has to pay for follies as heavily as for crimes, sometimes." He spoke half-absently, knowing that he had succeeded in his difficult little task.

"But in this case there'll be no need to pay. *There's* the ring—and I'm afraid your poor finger must be dreadfully sore!"

He dropped the beautiful emerald into her lap, and stood upright with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, how *can* I thank you!" Her joy was too real to find expression in words.

"You have saved me—and I'm so grateful."

"No need for gratitude." He smiled.

"But where is your wedding ring? Will you ever be able to get it on over that poor finger of yours?"

"Yes, it's much too large for me; I've grown thin since I was married," she said simply, producing the gold band as she spoke. "Here it is; will you put it on for me, please?"

He took it from her gently, and slipped it over her finger, still red from his manipulation, with an uncomfortable sense that he was riveting her fetters afresh.

"Now I must go." She coloured with a kind of embarrassed blush which made her look like a schoolgirl. "I—I don't know what I owe you for your time——"

"Nothing." He smiled and patted her arm kindly. "I'm delighted to have helped you. Now, if Sir Peter is to expect you at eight——"

"Yes, I must go." She rose quickly, and threw her satin wrap over the foamy whiteness of her chiffon frock. "Good-bye—and—thank you a thousand times!"

A second later she had vanished; and as he closed the door after her Caird felt an odd and quite genuine sense of pity stirring in his heart—a pity which allowed of no censure, no reproach for what had been, as she said, only a little harmless folly; which, nevertheless, had been like to end in tragedy.

"Poor little pretty thing!" His thoughts played tenderly round her as he resumed his interrupted toilet. "She's got a hard row to hoe, and she's only a child after all. Pity she didn't marry that good-looking young chap—they'd have

made a splendid couple. Well, it's no business of mine, and I don't suppose I shall ever run across little Lady Clinton again!"

He did not see her as he sat at dinner in the crowded restaurant; nor was she to be seen in the lounge afterwards, though he caught a glimpse of the man she had called Hugh pacing distractedly up and down in the street outside the hotel, unconscious of the shrewd eyes which watched him from the terrace above. It was evident that the young man knew of Sir Peter's arrival, yet could not tear himself away from the spot which housed the girl he loved; and Caird felt strangely sorry for the lover who had been twice bereft of his right to place a ring on the finger of his beloved.

At last, with a final lingering look at the great building, the young man turned and strode away into the night, and Caird rose and re-entered the hotel, intending to write a couple of letters and go to bed.

But just as his foot was upon the lowest stair a man touched him quietly on the arm, and turning quickly he found the head waiter at his elbow.

"*Pardon, M'sieu*"—Gustav was a Frenchman—"M. le Propriétaire makes you his compliments, and begs you to derange yourself sufficiently to make a visit to room Numero Quinze. There is a *pauvre Monsieur* there who is taken ill, and it is feared he will perhaps die without attention."

"Right. Show me the room." He spoke brusquely, all his professional instincts to the fore.

Led by Gustav, he hastened to the first floor, and was admitted without delay into a large room on the right hand side of the corridor. It was the usual hotel bedroom of the East, with high green walls and polished floor, and on the couch which stood across the foot of the two beds lay a man, with his collar torn off and his shirt loosened over his labouring bosom.

It was evident to Caird's practised eye, in that first glimpse, that the man was dying, probably from some affection of the heart; but for form's sake he made a brief examination of the patient—an examination

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which fully confirmed his previous lightning diagnosis.

Besides the manager and the waiter who had summoned Caird, there was a woman in the room ; and as he looked across to the chair in which she sat, her white chiffon skirts foaming around her feet, Caird recognised his visitor of a few hours' previously.

Instantly he reviewed the situation, and, walking across to her, said in a low voice :

" Lady Clinton, this is your husband ? Has he been excited, overwrought, to bring him to this state ? "

She looked at him with her childlike eyes, which yet were the eyes of a woman who had known tragedy, and her voice shook as she answered him.

" Yes. When he came in—only half an hour ago—he accused me of shameful things. He asked me if Hugh were my lover, and when I denied it, he struck me. . . . "

" Struck you ? "

" Yes. " Instinctively she looked down at her arm, where the mark of cruel fingers was plainly to be seen, marring its whiteness. " And then he said a hundred dreadful things : how I had allowed Hugh to buy me jewels in the *Bazar* in return for—for myself—— "

" In the *Bazar* ? But—how did he find that out ? "

" I don't know. But he raved at me like a—madman ; and then, quite suddenly, he clapped his hands to his heart—so"—she illustrated the gesture—" and fell. . . . "

" Would you be shocked to know that he is dying ? "

" Shocked ? No. I think"—she spoke slowly—" I think I should be almost—glad. "

Half an hour later Sir Peter Clinton passed away without regaining consciousness ; and although the hotel officials were plainly disturbed by the happening, thanks to Caird's intervention Lady Clinton was treated with the greatest consideration on every hand.

It was after she had retired, weeping now to the room which had been placed at her disposal, that Caird received the last shock of the evening, and it was one which made an indelible impression on his unusually retentive memory.

He had gathered from the girl's incoherent speech that in some mysterious way Sir Peter had been cognisant of the purchase of the emerald ring ; but it was not until he examined the dead man's still visage for the last time, wondering as he did so how any father could have given his young daughter to this satyr, that he came upon a clue to the mystery.

And when he did so, he realised, with a strange leap of his pulses, that this death sudden and tragic as it seemed, had probably been the means of preventing a lifelong persecution.

On the dead man's forehead, half hidden by the hair which hung, streakily, around it, there was a small, oddly shaped scar.

And the shape of the scar was that of a miniature horseshoe.

Nathaniel Rhodes.

The Flitting of Mr. Maurice Crane

By
HERBERT JENKINS

Author of "Bindle," "The Night Club," "Adventures of Bindle," "John Dene of Toronto," etc.



I

"CAN you keep yer mouth shut?" demanded the yard-foreman of the Victoria Depository and Furniture Removing Company, as he looked at Bindle with the air of one who has already made up his mind negatively upon the subject.

"If you'd lived a matter o' twenty years with Mrs. B., ole sport," replied Bindle, "you'd be able to give an oyster ten yards in the 'undred an' beat 'im every time."

"Well, there ain't got to be no blabbin' over this 'ere job," announced the foreman, a heavily-built man with a drink-swollen face, a bald head, and a soured temper.

"Shootin' the moon?" inquired Bindle innocently.

"Don't you worry what it's about, cockie," said the foreman surlily; "you jest do what yer told, and keep yer ruddy mouth shut."

Bindle eyed the man with disfavour.

"Pleasant way you got o' putting things, Tawny," he remarked amiably.

The foreman's hair was of a strangely faded tint, which had earned for him the name of Tawny. He disliked the familiarity, preferring to be called Mr. Hitch. Instead he was invariably called Tawny to his face, and Ole-'tch-an'-Scratch-it behind his back.

"You got to take the steam van and trailer to 18, Vanstorn Road, Balham, load up, then telephone 'ere and you'll get the address where you're to go. It's in the country. You'll be away two days. You'll draw ten bob a day exes. Be 'ere at seven."

"In the country?" queried Bindle. "What part of the country?"

"Never you mind what part of the country," said the foreman malevolently. "You jest obey orders, and keep that ugly mouth o' yours closed, then people won't know what blinkin' bad teeth you got. Stevens 'll be engineer, you can take Huggles and Wilkes. Send 'em back when you've loaded up. There'll be men at the other end to 'elp unload. Got it?"

"Wot a wonderful chap you are, Tawny, for explaining things." Bindle gazed at him in mock admiration, "and yer language too, since you joined that Sunday school wot took the tint out of yer complexion. Wonderful face you got for peepin' round an 'arp."

"One o' these days you'll get a thick ear, Joe Bindle," said the foreman angrily.

"Well, well," said Bindle philosophically, "better a thick ear than a thick 'ead."

"It's about fifty miles away," continued the foreman. "You got to be there at six, so you can put up for a couple of hour on the road, and get a kip. Now 'op it,

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and if you says a ruddy word of where you've been, or where yer goin' to, I'll cnt yer pinkish liver out. I've 'ad my blinkin' eye on you some time," added the foreman darkly; "you an' yer stutterin' tricks."

"Where you learns it all does me," said Bindle good-humouredly, as he turned away; then, as a sudden inspiration strick him, he added, "No one couldn't 'ave their eye long on a face like yours without blinkin', Tawny. So-long."

Bindle always enjoyed getting the last word.

II

"Mrs. B.," remarked Bindle that evening, as he leaned back contentedly after a particularly successful supper of sheep's heart stuffed with sage-and-onions, in the preparation of which Mrs. Bindle was an adept. "Mrs. B., there are them wot appreciates your ole man."

Mrs. Bindle sniffed scornfully, and, rising from the table, proceeded to draw out of the oven a rhubarb tart, which she banged upon the table. To Mrs. Bindle emphasis was the salt of life. As Bindle had once remarked, "My missis does everythink as if she meant it. She cooks like giddy-o, talks like a bust drain, an' prays like 'ell."

"What's the matter now?" she snapped, curiosity overcoming her scorn of all things relating to her spouse.

"I got to go away on a secret service mission," he announced through a mouthful of rhubarb tart.

"Where are you going?" she demanded suspiciously.

"I ain't allowed to say," was the response. "It 'ud be quod if I did. Ole Tawny calls me up this afternoon and says, 'Bindle,' 'e says, 'there ain't a stouter 'eart than yours in the British Empire.' Of course I jest looks down and says, 'Bow-wow!'"

"If you want me to listen you'd better talk sense."

Mrs. Bindle slashed out another V of pie-crust, tipped it on to the plate that

Bindle held towards her, and proceeded to dab rhubarb beside it.

"Sense it is, Mrs. B.," he said. "I got to go away for two days. Now mind you don't get up to——"

"Where are you going?" demanded Mrs. Bindle.

"That's a secret. Nobody ain't permitted to know."

For some moments Mrs. Bindle eyed him suspiciously.

"You're going to the races!" There was grim conviction in her tones. "Don't deny it," she added, "I know."

"It ain't no use trying to keep things from you, Lizzie," said Bindle with a grin. "'Earty didn't want me to tell you; still, if you've found out, it can't be 'elped, can it?"

"Mr. Hearty?" interrogated Mrs. Bindle.

"Terrible goin's on." Bindle shook his head with gloomy foreboding. "Been putting things on horses for months, 'e 'as—cokernuts, pineapples, bags of potatoes—an' now 'e's goin' to Epsom to put 'is shirt on."

"Bindle, don't be disgusting. What do you mean about Mr. Hearty?"

"Well, you jest nip round and ask 'im," said Bindle. "If I'm going to the races to-morrow so is 'Earty. That was a damn fine tart, Mrs. B.," he added as he rose from the table. "I got to be down at the yard to-morrow at seven," he announced, as he walked towards the door.

"Where are you going to?"

"The place where they don't play billiards," he hummed as, picking up his cap from the dresser, he went out, leaving Mrs. Bindle a prey to jealousy and suspicion.

III

"I shall miss you when' you're gone. 'Uggles," said Bindle, "jest as I shall miss ole Wilkie's cough." He was seated on the tailboard of the trailer-pantechnicon between his two associates, Hugges and Wilkes—Hugges grinning vacuously, Wilkes coughing intermittently. "You ain't had sorts as 'umpers¹ go; but I'd 'ave to be bloomin' drunk to see you two with wings"

¹ Furniture-removing men

and 'arps. Wot they're goin' to do in 'eaven with your cough, Wilkie, and your complexion, 'Uggle—well, it does me."

As he spoke the pantechicon and trailer turned at a generous angle into the Vanstorn Road, Balham. A minute later they drew up in front of Number 18, a modern, semi-detached villa of the "studious" type.

"Here we are, my little love-birds," said Bindle, leisurely tumbling off the tail-board.

As they passed through the gate of Number 18, the front door was opened by a smooth, puffy little man with an unhealthy skin and a pompous manner. He was wearing a snuff-coloured suit of painful newness, a pink shirt, a white satin tie with a diamond pin, and white spats. Across his waistcoat was drawn a massive gold chain, whilst on his fingers were several rings. His scanty black hair was well greased across an unintellectual forehead.

"Blinkin' profiteer," muttered Huggles with unusual eloquence, as they walked up the path.

Bindle turned and looked at him with interest.

"It ain't often you speaks, 'Uggle," he remarked, "but when you does, it's a bull every time."

"Are you the moving-men?" demanded he of the brown suit, in a tone that some men seem to think necessary to adopt to their social inferiors.

"Regular Sherlock 'Olmes you are, sir," said Bindle cheerfully.

"I am Mr. Crane, Mr. Maurice Crane. Which is the foreman?"

"Now, need you ask, sir?" said Bindle reproachfully. "Look at these two ole reprobates, do they look——?"

"I want to speak to you," interrupted Mr. Crane, and turning on his heel he led the way into the house.

"'E's a dook right enough," said Bindle, addressing Wilkes and Huggles. "'E's so polite"; and he passed into the dining-room, Mr. Crane carefully closing the door behind him.

"You understand that this is an——" he paused.

"It's 'all right, sir," said Bindle reassuringly, "nothing ain't going to be said to nobody."

"There's no name on the van?" went on Mr. Crane.

Bindle looked out of the window.

"Not so much as a number, sir."

"And you don't know where you are going."

"Well, sir," said Bindle cheerfully, "'Earty and Mrs. B. seems pretty sure it's 'ell; but——"

"Don't be impertinent." Mr. Crane looked at Bindle severely. "You don't know your destination, where you are taking the—er—furniture?"

"'Aven't a notion, sir," was the response. "I got to 'phone up the office soon as we're loaded up, then I'll 'ear."

Mr. Crane nodded approvingly.

"The neighbours," began Mr. Crane. Again he paused. He was obviously nervous.

"You leave them to me, sir," said Bindle confidentially. "I can tell the tale."

"And you understand," said Mr. Crane, putting his hand in his pocket and jingling his money seductively.

"When the V.D. gets a job like this 'ere, sir, they always sends me. 'Joe Bindle,' says the manager to me yesterday afternoon, 'if it wasn't for you,' 'e says, 'Gawd knows wot would 'ave 'appened to the British Empire.' You see, sir," he continued, "I'm married myself," and he winked knowingly.

Mr. Crane started violently.

"You—I—what do you mean?" he demanded, fear and suspicion in his eyes.

"Don't you worry, sir, you jest leave it all to me. I'll see you through, safe as 'ouses."

"I'm going down by train to——" began Mr. Crane—and again he hesitated—to where you're coming to," he concluded.

"There ain't no trains runnin' to where I'm goin'," murmured Bindle with mournful conviction. "An' now I'll get on with the job, sir, if you please"; and with that he turned and walked to the door and went out.

For some time Mr. Crane watched the work of dismantling his home. His early

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inclination to interfere Bindle had discouraged.

"Now, you jest set down an' watch, sir," he had said, "or you'll get them pretty duds o' yours all messed up, an' wot'll she say then?"

Soon after ten Mr. Crane departed, having given explicit instructions to Bindle not to divulge a secret with which he was unacquainted. Mr. Crane did not seem to see the inconsistency of the request.

Contrary to Bindle's expectations and those of Mr. Crane, the neighbours evinced no very particular interest as to where the furniture from Number 18 was going. They gazed from behind their curtains and from their front doors, according to the state of their presentibility; but nothing more. A few of the tradespeople from time to time took up strong strategical positions, and watched the proceedings.

The most persistent of these itinerants was a telegraph-girl, who seemed to have the whole morning before her. A perky, diminutive little creature with a scrap of fair hair tied behind with a pink ribbon, she stood drinking in the scene, her jaws moving continuously in the process of chewing gum. At length, as if to assure herself of the correctness of her own deductions, she turned to Bindle as he was returning to the house.

"Moving?" she inquired indifferently, nodding her head in the direction of the house.

"No, darling, we're doin' it to make our 'air grow. We puts everythink in the van, then we takes it all back into the 'ouse again, and we feels better. Gives us a sort of appetite for supper."

"Funny, ain't you?" she retorted, quite unmoved, as she continued her chewing.

At noon Bindle and his mates knocked off for dinner, locking the doors of the vans and also of the house. At one o'clock they were back again.

As Bindle turned into the garden he caught sight of a lady standing at the front door. She was a little slip of a thing, brown hair, brown eyes, brown dress, with very red lips and an almost childish expression of countenance. Her hands were trembling violently, and her large brown

eyes looked as if they would start from her head. As Bindle approached she took a step towards him.

"What—what are you doing with my furniture?" she cried in an unsteady voice.

"Your furniture, mum?" repeated Bindle as if he were not quite sure that he had heard aright.

"You mustn't take it away, oh, you mustn't!"

She clasped her trembling hands together, and looked at him beseechingly. There was in her voice the note of a child who sees a cherished toy in danger of destruction.

"We're takin' it away accordin' to orders, mum," said Bindle, forgetful of his instructions in his sympathy for the pathetic figure before him.

"But—but whose orders?"

"Fat little chap 'e was, mum, with jewels all over 'im, an' black 'air all smarmed down, enough to cause a grease shortage."

"That was my husband," she replied. "I am Mrs. Crane."

She was now trembling violently, and swayed slightly as if about to collapse.

"Look 'ere, mum," said Bindle, soberly, "you better come in and set down, you ain't fit to stand out 'ere."

Opening the door with the key he held in his hand, he led the way into one of the rooms where a large, chintz-covered easy-chair stood near the door. Bindle jerked his thumb to indicate to Mrs. Crane that she was to sit there. With a sigh that was half a sob, she collapsed into its capacious depths, which seemed to emphasise the slightness of her figure.

"Where—where are you taking—" she paused.

"I ain't allowed to say, mum. I'm sorry," said Bindle sympathetically. "As a matter of fact, I don't know myself 'll we're loaded up, then I gets my orders."

"Oh, Maurice! how could you?" she moaned. Then, suddenly turning to Bindle, she cried: "You mustn't, you won't will you? It's my home, you see, and— and—" she broke off, sobbing.

Bindle stood before her, cap in hand, the picture of embarrassment and indecision.

Presently the storm of weeping subsided, and she looked up at him through her tears, a pitiable figure of despair.

"He—he sent me away, and—and—it isn't his fault; it's that dreadful woman. Oh! you won't take them away, will you? Please—please say you won't."

"Look 'ere, mum," said Bindle with sudden decision, "you an' me's got to have a little talk about this 'ere"; and he seated himself on the edge of a chair opposite.

When Bindle left the house to continue the work of removal, there was a grim set about his jaw and a strange look in his eyes. For the rest of the day his habitual good-humour seemed to have forsaken him. The work proceeded without the usual quips and jokes, and Huggles and Wilkes missed them. From time to time they gazed at their comrade and then at each other, as if puzzled to account for the change.

IV

"'Ere, steady, ole sports," cried Bindle, "gently does it. Valuable little bit o' stuff this 'ere."

Three men were toiling laboriously with a large, double-doored oak cabinet of Jacobean design and dubious antiquity. Bindle was dodging from side to side in an endeavour to prevent damage.

"Pleasant little canary-cage," he murmured, during a brief rest, as he wiped his forehead with a large khaki-coloured handkerchief.

"Where's she going?" inquired one of the men.

"Dinin'-room," replied Bindle. "Keep her upright, there's things inside," he added by way of explanation. "Mustn't upset the bird-seed."

On arriving that morning at six o'clock at the address in Brighton given him the night before, Bindle had found three men waiting to help unload the van. Stevens, the engineer, had gone to get a sleep, whilst Bindle had immediately set to work. During the journey to Brighton he had slept fairly comfortably on a heap of straw lying on top of the trailer.

After infinite labour and much grumbling and blowing on the part of the men, the cabinet was planted in the dining-room opposite the fireplace.

"That finishes the dining-room," murmured Bindle. "Now, then, you ole warriors," he called after the men as they trooped out of the room, "put your backs into it, an' you shall 'ave a drink of milk and a bun if you're good boys. Ah! 'ere you are, sir," as Mr. Crane bustled into the house.

"So you got here safely," he inquired, still anxious and furtive. "No one——" he paused.

"No one said nothink, sir, nor asked nothink."

"You are quite sure."

"Sure as sure, sir," said Bindle reassuringly.

"You were not followed," persisted Mr. Crane.

"Nothink followed us along the road, sir, an' I didn't 'ear an aeroplane."

Mr. Crane drew a deep sigh of relief.

"We've got the drawin'-room an' the dinin'-room done, sir, an' now we'll get on with the other rooms."

Mr. Crane looked about him, apparently pleasantly surprised at the progress that had been made during the last three hours.

"There's a—er—er—a lady coming," he said. "You had—er—better call me."

"Right-o, sir," said Bindle cheerfully, as he walked down the passage towards the door, whistling. "My Wife won't let me."

Mr. Crane gazed after him with a look of doubt on his face.

A few minutes later Bindle was back in the dining-room examining the oak cabinet, apparently to see that it had suffered no damage.

"Where's Mr. Crane?"

Bindle span round on his heel and stood regarding a flamboyantly-dressed girl with puffy features, full hips, and startling yellow hair. Her manner was supercilious, and her diction that of Bow.

"'E was 'ere a moment ago, mum, or miss," said Bindle, when he had taken stock of the stranger. "Did you want 'im?"

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"Tell him I'm here," said the girl, as she proceeded to peel off her gloves.

Bindle noticed a broad circle of gold upon the third finger of her left hand. He winked knowingly at a portrait of a pale, narrow-headed man, looking like a half-ripe banana.

"Very good, miss—mum, I mean. Who shall I say?" Bindle gave a covert glance in the direction of the oak cabinet.

"Mrs. Crane," she replied indifferently.

"Right-o, miss, I'll go an' fetch 'im."

As he turned towards the door Mr. Crane entered; at the sight of the girl his customary nervousness seemed to increase. He fluttered across to her with a forced, rather sickly smile.

"The drawing-room is quite ready, my dear," he said, looking at her anxiously, as if uncertain of her mood.

"That'll have to be moved," she announced, pointing to the cabinet, and without any attempt at greeting, by which Bindle decided in his own mind that they had parted only a short time before.

"Moved, my dear?" interrogated Mr. Crane.

"I don't like it. It's hideous. You'll have to sell it."

"I—er—" began Mr. Crane.

"What's inside, shelves?" she demanded.

"It's—er—there's nothing inside," said Mr. Crane. "It's just an ornament."

"Ornament!" she cried scornfully, going over to it and turning the handle. "Where's the key?" she demanded over her shoulder.

"The key ought to be in it," said Mr. Crane, turning and looking interrogatingly at Bindle.

"I got the key, sir," said Bindle, rummaging in his trousers pocket. "I took it out when we was bringin' it in, for fear it might catch up against somethink."

With a grin he handed the key to the girl, who proceeded to insert it in the lock. Indolently and indifferently she opened the right-hand door, then with a cry started back. Mr. Crane turned to see the cause of the cry. His eyes became fixed, almost bulging out of his head.

"Good morning, Maurice."

Out of the oak cabinet stepped the diminutive form of the real Mrs. Crane, perfectly self-possessed and smiling.

The effect of the greeting upon Mr. Crane was curious. His hands fell to his sides, his jaw dropped, and his thick, pursy lips gaped. His face became an ashen colour, and in his eyes was terror, as he gazed at the neat and self-possessed figure of his wife.

"Won't you introduce me to your friend, Maurice?" inquired Mrs. Crane sweetly, looking from one to the other.

Mr. Crane swallowed twice laboriously, at the end of each effort his lips parting again in a silly gape. He blinked his eyes rapidly; but speech was denied him.

Bindle stood in the background, all the satisfaction of a successful impresario depicted upon his features.

Seeing that nothing was to be got from her husband, Mrs. Crane turned to the fair-haired, flamboyantly-dressed girl, who had stood the picture of dazed stupidity.

"Won't you sit down?"

Mrs. Crane's honied sweetness seemed to goad the girl to madness. She laughed a sneering, insolent laugh.

"You damn fool!" she cried, turning to the now trembling figure of Mr. Crane. "They've tricked you, or else," her eyes suddenly blazed, "you've done it on purpose. You mealy-mouthed, chicken-hearted swine," and a stream of obscene vituperation poured from her lips.

Bindle took a step forward; but the girl did not wait.

With a fresh volley of abuse she flounced out of the room, Mrs. Crane following her into the hall as if to assure herself that her visitor had really left the house. When she returned she stood for a moment regarding her husband, who had sunk into a chair, the picture of dejection and despair.

"Please—please have the furniture put back into the van."

Bindle turned round from the window where he had been watching the departure of the vanquished "bit 'o fluff." For a moment he hesitated, then, dashing forward, was just in time to catch Mrs. Crane as she fell.

"Well, I'm blowed, what would Mrs. B. say now," he mumbled. "'Ere, look 'ere, sir, this is your job," he cried, looking across at where Mr. Crane sat, a moist and beaten man.

Seeing that no help was to be expected from Mr. Crane, Bindle gently lowered his wife to the floor and, placing a hassock beneath her head, bolted out of the room in search of water. When he returned, after having told the men to wait by the van, he found Mr. Crane kneeling by his wife's side, the picture of helpless misery.

As Bindle knelt down beside her, a cup of water in his hand, Mrs. Crane opened her eyes. After looking at him for a moment with a puzzled expression, she smiled.

Lifting her head gently, Bindle placed the cup to her lips. She drank a little, then with a motion of her head signed to him to take it away. She sighed deeply and looked inquiringly at her husband, who was still on his knees gazing down at her with unseeing eyes.

"Now," said Bindle, "you jest lift 'er into that chair, an' she'll be all right in two ticks."

Mr. Crane seemed grateful for something to do. Stooping down, he lifted the slight form of his wife and placed her in a chair.

For some minutes Bindle and Mr. Crane stood gazing down at Mrs. Crane. Presently she appeared to gather herself together, and, looking from one to the other, she smiled.

"I'm all right now," she said weakly. "You—you mustn't bother any more."

"Well, mum, if you don't mind bein' left alone for a minute or two, me an' 'im's got one or two little things to settle."

He indicated Mr. Crane with his thumb. "You're sure you'll be all right?" he asked anxiously.

Mrs. Crane nodded and smiled wanly.

"Now, sir," said Bindle, addressing Mr. Crane, "we'll go into the kitchen."

There was a grimness about Bindle's tone that caused Mr. Crane to look apprehensively in the direction of his wife; but her eyes were closed. Bindle's air, as he stood holding open the door, was so determined that, after a momentary hesitation, Mr. Crane passed through it into the

kitchen, as if compelled by sheer force of personality. Carefully closing the door, Bindle stood before it facing his victim.

"Now, look 'ere, sir," he said. "I met some queer coves in my time, coves wot wasn't over particular wot they did; but you're about the damndest and dirtiest tyke I ever see without a muzzle"; he paused, as if to give Mr. Crane an opportunity of resenting or denying the charge. As he did neither, Bindle continued:

"I ain't been brought up in a young ladies' school, an' I seen some pretty dirty things done by men an' women an' 'orses; but I'm blowed if this ain't the dirtiest I ever 'eard of."

Again he paused and looked at Mr. Crane, who stood clutching with both hands the corner of the kitchen table, as if unable to support himself with his own legs. His face was a ghastly grey, his lips dry, and in his eyes was fear.

"I 'eard all about it from your missus, 'ow you got 'er to go away to see 'er mother while you nipped orf with the sticks an' that there bit o' stuff wot jest got it in the neck. I brought 'er down in that there black cupboard o' yours—your missus, I mean. Such goin's-on didn't ought to be allowed. Now, you can lose me my job by reportin' me, or you can 'ave it out in the back-yard man to man. Which is it to be?"

Bindle looked eagerly at the quaking figure before him. Twice Mr. Crane swallowed noisily. He made several ineffectual efforts to moisten his lips. Finally he blinked his eyes; but no sound came from him.

"If you could make it the back-yard, I'd be kind o' grateful," said Bindle. "I want to 'it you badly; but I can't do it while you looks like that. You're bigger'n wot I am, an' you ain't so old, an' I wouldn't mind betting two to one you ain't got various veins in yer legs, so I'm givin' away a lot of things besides weight. Now, do take orf yer coat," he said persuasively.

And then Mr. Crane did a strange thing. His knees seemed slowly to double up beneath him, and he sank down, still clutching with both hands the edge of the

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table. Burying his face in his arms, he sobbed the hard, dry sobs of a man who is alone with his soul.

"Well, I'm blowed," muttered Bindle, his eyes upon the light patch on the back of Mr. Crane's head. "If this ain't It"; and he walked over to the table and stood gazing down at the sobbing man, as if he had been some new and strange animal.

"Please leave us now," said a quiet voice behind him. He turned swiftly to find Mrs. Crane standing just inside the kitchen door, a new light in her eyes. "Get the furniture back in the van, please; I will settle up everything with your employers. You have been very, very kind to me. I shall never forget it. I will thank you later," and she looked up into Bindle's face with a tremulous little smile.

A moment later Bindle was blowing his nose violently in the passage.

"Well, I'm blowed," he muttered, as he made his way into the dining-room. "Jest fancy 'er wantin' 'im back, an' me gettin' mixed up in—'ere, you ole reprobates," he shouted out of the window, "we got to load up again. Now, look slippery. Been a little family scrap 'ere," he said a moment later, by way of explanation, to the men as they trooped into the room. "Now, then, Charlie Chaplin," this to a large man enveloped in a voluminous pair of trousers, "up Guards an' at 'em."

The men grinned, they had a fairly clear idea of what had taken place.

"Well, I'm blowed," said Bindle, when they were all at work again, as he scratched his head through his cap. "If this ain't the rummest go I ever——"

"So you've come back." Mrs. Bindle proceeded to splosh Irish stew from a saucepan into a large, buff-coloured pie-dish.

"The tired ole 'orse returns to 'is stable," said Bindle with a grin, as he walked over to the sink for the evening rinse.

"Depend on you to come home when your stomach's empty. About the only time you ever do come home," she snapped. "Where've you been?"

"I been seein' life," said Bindle through

the roller-towel, with which he was polishing his face, "an' I'm tired. Two nights I've slept on top of a van a-singin', 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star,' an' thinkin' of you, Lizzie. I'll tell yer all about it when I taken the edge off a little appetite I got."

Mrs. Bindle sniffed and proceeded to fill Bindle's plate. For twenty minutes he ate with noisy enjoyment; finally he leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief and repletion.

"Now, Mrs. B., for the story," he said as he filled and lighted his pipe. When it was drawing to his entire satisfaction, he started to tell Mrs. Bindle of the happenings of the last two days. In her interest she forgot to clear away the supper things.

"Jezabel!" was her comment when Bindle had concluded his account of the discomfiture of the pseudo Mrs. Crane.

"That might 'ave been 'er name; but she didn't 'appen to mention it."

"And what happened afterwards?" inquired Mrs. Bindle eagerly.

Bindle explained his interview with Mr. Crane in the kitchen, and how it had been interrupted.

"When they come out of the kitchen" he concluded, "they was like love-birds—jest like you an' me, Lizzie. Now wot does a woman like 'er see in that bit o' kidney soot dressed up like a nob? That's wot does me."

Mrs. Bindle drew in her lips with the air of a woman who knows, but will not tell.

"Now they're back in Balham as 'appy as 'appy. It was a pity," he added reminiscently, "that 'e didn't come into the back-yard. I did want to 'it 'im."

Mrs. Bindle nodded her head approvingly much to Bindle's surprise.

"And did she give you anything?" demanded Mrs. Bindle.

"She offered it; but you don't tak money for doin' things like that," said Bindle simply.

Again Mrs. Bindle nodded her head.

"You done right for once, Joe Bindle," she remarked grudgingly; whereat Bindle gazed at her in mute astonishment, for he remembered that he had repeated the language he had used to Mr. Crane.

"Wot I don't understand," he said,

why she wanted 'im back, 'im wot 'ad done the dirty on 'er like that, an' 'e wasn't a rose-show to look at. Seemed to think it was all the other gal, she did. Funny things, women," he muttered, "funny as funny."

"He was her husband," said Mrs. Bindle sententiously, "and in the eyes of the Lord——"

"If 'e'd come out into that back-yard," said Bindle grimly, "'e'd 'ave been the funniest sight for the eyes——"

"Blasphemer!"

"An' us gettin' on so well, too," Bindle grinned. "Suppose I'd nipped

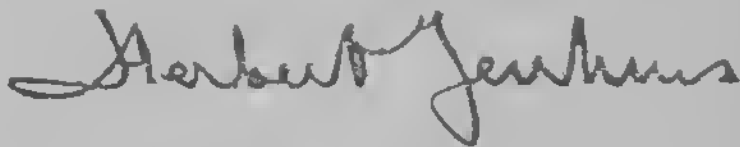
orf with our sticks an' a little bit of fluff," queried Bindle as he moved towards the door, "would you 'ave taken me back?"

"Don't be disgusting, Bindle."

"But would you?" Bindle's hand was on the handle of the door.

"You try it and see"—there was a world of grim meaning in the retort.

"Well, if women ain't the funniest things that ever was," Bindle muttered, as he closed the door behind him, bent on taking a little stroll before turning in. "They beats silkworms, an' they was pretty difficult to get the 'ang of."



(Another new "Bindle" story will appear next month.)



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THE TIP OF THE SCALE

By RUBY M. AYRES

I
WHEN young Furnival proposed to Marion Carver, all classes of society in the little town wherein they both resided held its breath in sheer and profound amazement.

Young Furnival was a gentleman; his father had been a well-to-do solicitor, and he lived with his mother and two sisters in one of the best houses in one of the best parts of the little snobbish suburban town wherein Mary Carver's father kept a small grocer's shop.

It was an unpretentious shop, and Carver was an unpretentious man; he served behind the bacon counter himself in a white apron, and his wife sat in the cashier's desk.

Mary was their only child, and she had been—what her father proudly called "educated"; which meant that he had sent her to a school which was really more expensive than he could afford, and that

she could play the piano better than either of young Furnival's sisters, and sing love-songs in a very charming mezzo that outshone every other amateur in the town.

Old Carver and his wife adored her; if they had spoken the truth, they would probably have said that it was a never-ending wonder to them how they came to have such a daughter; she was the most sacred thing in their lives; they would never allow her in the shop, and it was the dream of her father's life to be able to save enough money to enable them to move away from the shop premises, and live—as he called it—"private."

The shop, which he recognised as a fit environment for himself and his wife, he considered degradation for Marion; his secret ambition was that she should marry a gentleman.

"She's fit to marry a duke," he had told his wife so many times that she, simple soul, had firmly grown to believe that some

day the duke would graciously come along the High Street and fulfil his obligations by stopping at the door of "Carver's General Stores."

The sons of other tradespeople in the town who would gladly have cast eyes in Marion's direction were severely discouraged; the doors of old Carver's hospitality were closed to them, and Marion was walled about by many hopes and aspirations, most of them foolish ones.

The girl herself was pretty and unaffected; she was very fond of her parents, but secretly she was amused at them; she had no vain illusions about a duke, though more than once her blue eyes had turned wistfully in the direction of young Furnival.

He was twenty-two then, and articled to a solicitor in London; he went up to town every day, and every day his way to the station took him past Carver's General Stores.

Where he did his courting, or how, nobody ever discovered; but one morning the stolidity of the little town was startled by the bombshell piece of news that young Furnival and Marion Carver were engaged.

And up at one of the best houses in the best part of the town young Furnival's mother wept and declared that her heart was broken, while down the High Street, above the unpretentious little grocer's shop, Marion Carver's mother wept also, and declared it to be the happiest day of her life.

"I always knew our girl would do well," so Marion's father told any of his customers who were interested (and they were all interested). "Look how she's been educated!"

And his kindly heart sang for joy as he carved up the bacon, because now there no longer seemed any need to scrape and save quite so diligently in order to live "privately."

Marion would have a house of her own, and he and his wife could continue to live over the shop; he thanked heaven for the thing which he considered entirely due to his foresight in having had Marion educated.

That was towards the end of July, and most before the nine days' wonder-chatter

of the town had subsided, and before young Furnival's mother and sisters had made up their minds to invite Marion to tea, the war broke out, and its unknown terrors put everything of minor importance out of their heads.

Young Furnival was a Territorial, and his regiment was called up within the first forty-eight hours.

His mother wept and wrung her hands, even while in the war she saw a merciful providence intervening to save her son from the clutches of "that girl."

There was no more talk of an early wedding; old Carver shook his head over the bacon counter, and wondered how soon prices would begin to soar.

He was terribly proud of his future son-in-law in the uniform of a full-blown lieutenant; in his heart he wished he himself had a son to send swaggering off against the enemy; he told his daughter that her tears were sinful, and that she ought to be glad that she could send her man to fight for his country.

She looked up at him with wet, indignant eyes.

"And supposing he's killed?" she asked tragically.

Old Carver stared; such a possibility had not occurred to him; the excitement and glamour of the thing had run away with his imagination; he could only see victory, and the enemy slain in his thousands.

"Killed! he won't be killed," he answered, speaking very loudly as if to carry conviction, but Marion only wept the more.

She clung round young Furnival's neck in the little dark sitting-room behind the shop, almost speechless with grief.

"You'll come back—promise me! promise me!" she wailed, and his eyes were almost as wet as hers, as he kissed her and said huskily that of course he should come back.

He had almost to tear himself from her in the end, and then for a time the sun went out of Marion's world; for she loved him sincerely, and love had sharpened her instinctive dread.

When the first terrible casualty list came out she knew she had expected to see his

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name amongst those hundreds; when she found it was not there, she shivered, and braced herself for the uncertainty of waiting again.

Then after some weeks came a ray of hope which was yet a fresh kind of despair: Furnival was going to India. He dashed home for a week-end leave to say good-bye; already he seemed to have grown more manly and developed; he was light-hearted, too, and a little impatient at Marion's tears.

"But, darling—it's better than France, surely!" he protested.

"I know, I know——" she sobbed. "But you'll be away so long! It may be years before I see you again. You'll forget all about me."

He silenced the words with passionate kisses; he would never forget her, he declared; she was the only woman in the world for him; if they did not meet again for twenty years he should love her just as well as he did now.

And it was four years before they met again; four years, during which a great many things happened—the most important being that old Carver made a fortune.

It was partly luck, and partly profiteering. In the first place, a large piece of derelict land which he had once bought as a bad speculation, and which had been the white elephant of his life, was purchased by the Government for an exorbitant sum, on account of its nearness both to a railway and the river; and from that moment his luck never turned back—he went on from success to success, piling up the money, and growing fatter and more self-important, while other people—amongst them young Furnival's mother and sisters—went down the scale.

Their moderate income, which had been sufficient before the war, was barely enough now to keep them in decency, and there was no possibility of increasing it.

The girls tried to get posts, but their incompetence debarred them even from Government offices; things were very sadly indeed in that best house in the best part of the town, and though once or twice Marion Carver made timid overtures to them, she was coldly repulsed; their pride

could not bear that she should see them in their broken fortunes; they hated her and her parents for their new affluence.

Old Carver had left the shop after all, and gone to live "private" in a house not many yards away from the Furnivals': he did up his new abode in lavish style, and without much taste; he fitted every window with a flower-box, and every box with flaming geraniums and white daisies; he painted the gates of the carriage-drive bright green, and bought a landaulette from one of his customers who could no longer afford to run it.

When the petrol restrictions came out, he handed it over with great magnanimity to the local hospital for wounded soldiers, and headed every subscriptions-list in the town with a generous sum.

"I've made my money in the town, and they shan't say I'm mean," was his argument.

He dressed his wife and daughter extravagantly; he took them to town to the theatre once a week (on early-closing day), he smoked fat cigars, and always managed to get plenty of whisky even after it was controlled.

Little by little, people who liked a good meal and generous hospitality, began to take them up; only the Furnivals remained coldly aloof.

Old Carver was sorely perplexed in his mind.

"Dash it all! I'd be only too pleased to give 'em a hand," he said to Marion but she shrugged her shoulders.

"Better leave them alone; they never liked me, and never will," she said with a sigh.

But she wrote to young Furnival every day, and posted the budget once a week: she knew that he was having a good time in India, and she wept in secret jealousy over the various snapshots which he sent her of himself and his friends.

There seemed to be a great many women figuring in those snapshots, and gradually she began to reason it out to herself that if he was having such a good time and enjoying himself so much, why should not she?

So she flung herself whole-heartedly into

any fun that was going, and just then there was a good deal going in a small way in the quiet little town, for a regiment of the Leicestershires was billeted there, and the subalterns were mostly quite pleased and ready to be entertained.

Old Carver entertained them royally.

"The best is only just good enough for brave men," so he said. "Come any time you like—all of you! always sure of a welcome."

Several of them fell in love with Marion, but though she liked their attentions, she never once swerved from her devotion to young Furnival; he was the man for her, the only man in her world.

Even when Donald Anstey, who had had a 'Varsity education, and whose father was a wealthy manufacturer in the north, almost went on his knees to her to marry him, she shook her head.

"I can't! I'm engaged!—you know that."

"But the chap's in India," Anstey urged. "He may never come back; loads of things may happen, and the war's going on for years and years yet! Why not have a good time while you can! I'll give you a topping time; say yes, my sweet."

He made love very well and earnestly, but Marion said no.

"I don't love you, and I do love him, and if he never came back"—her voice shook—"I should love him just the same—always!"

It was just about that time that young Furnival's letters began to get less frequent and less ardent. Marion, who understood nothing of the conditions under which he was living, fretted, and put it all down to changed affections; for a fortnight she never wrote to him at all as retaliation, but she cried herself to sleep every night, and was the most miserable girl in the world. Then her mother died—quite suddenly, sitting in a chair in the handsome drawing-room in which she had never really felt comfortable or at home—and her death seemed to turn the world upside-down for old Carver and his daughter. Perhaps neither of them had realised how very much she had been to them—she had been a humble, self-effacing old

soul; one of those women who are never really appreciated until death has taken them.

Her loss broke old Carver's heart, and turned him from a generous, hearty old man into a grim, unsympathetic snob.

He began to close his hospitable doors and hoard his money; he was less affectionate to Marion; and, worried about young Furnival and grieved about her mother, the girl hardly knew how to bear herself.

Anstey saw his opportunity, and made the most of it; he dropped the rôle of lover, and constituted himself her friend; he was always there, always cheerful and willing to help and comfort; it was the most natural thing in the world that she should begin to find him indispensable to her life, he was the one bright spot in a world that seemed suddenly to have grown sunless.

He encouraged her to speak to him about Jim Furnival; he was careful never to say a word against him, and to be always kind and hopeful; he manufactured excuses for his silences and brief letters, when in his heart he did not believe there were any excuses to be made; he thought—and hoped—that Furnival was getting tired of his engagement.

It was a shock, therefore, when one day a wire came, announcing that Jim was on his way home—ill!

Marion's spirits went up like rockets; the colour came back to her cheeks and the light to her eyes; she thanked Anstey for his kindness to her, but let him see that she no longer required him; she could comfort herself easily enough now without his assistance; she found hundreds of excuses for her lover's changed manner—it was due to illness! she ought to have known that it was!—her first romantic love for him came surging back to her heart—she counted the days till they should meet.

The years of anxiety and pain were ended—he was coming home safely after all.

And he came home safely—that is, he came home whole, and without a wound, but with his health broken by tropical suns and tropical fevers.

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"A wreck, that's what he is," old Carver said bluntly to his daughter. "I should hardly have known him, and that's a fact."

The same thought was in Marion's heart; all young Furnival's smartness and cheeriness seemed to have gone; he was thin and shrunken with fever; always tired, and inclined to be irritable.

After a great struggle he got a diminutive pension from an ungrateful country, and was discharged as unfit for further service.

He was unfit for anything else as well, for the time being, at all events; work of any sort was beyond him for many months, so the doctors said; he was too sick a dog to trouble himself about anything.

It was winter when he came back to England, and after the heat of India he found the cold intolerable; he crouched over the fire most of the day, shivering and cursing his inability to rouse himself.

Perhaps it was only natural that, after the first few days, Marion Carver should get tired of crouching over the fire with him; she was strong and healthy, and had expanded greatly in the sunshine of her father's wealth.

She was invited out constantly, and though as a rule young Furnival was included in the invitations, it was seldom that he could accept.

"But you go," he urged. "Of course you must go! I don't want you to be tied to me all day. I shall be better when the warm weather comes."

So Marion went, and young Anstey, who could dance and skate and drive a car and do most of the things expected of an up-to-date man, generally went with her.

He was a strong, strapping fellow, and a bit of a wangler (at any rate, so far he had managed to hold down a home job), and in her heart Marion unconsciously began to compare him with Jim Furnival—to the latter's disadvantage.

She wondered what life would be like were she married to an invalid, and had to spend most of her time nursing him; she had not had much pleasure out of her engagement; its first glow and rapture had been cut short by the war, and it had never been resumed.

Even now that her circumstances had so changed, Furnival's people made no friendly overtures to her; she had certainly been to tea once or twice, but in such an air of frigidity that she had been thankful to get away from the house.

She knew that they condemned her because she did not wish to spend every moment of her time with her fiancé, and the knowledge drove her to defiance; what did she care what they thought?

One night old Carver broached the subject of marriage to her.

"What about setting up a house of your own?" he asked.

Marion flushed.

"How can we? what can we marry on? Jim has nothing but his pension."

A few months ago she knew that her father would have told her not to worry about money—that he had enough for them all, but now he only said:

"You've been engaged long enough; I don't hold with long engagements. I shall speak to Jim."

Marion laughed bitterly.

"It won't do any good," she said; she knew so well what Jim would say, that he had no prospects, and that marriage was impossible for the present.

And Jim said all that and more besides; he said—with a touch of his mother's obstinacy and pride—that if Mr. Carver did not consider him good enough for Marion, she could be free if she wished it.

The old man looked at him, and his eyes fell; the thought was in both their minds that four years ago things had been very different, that four years ago Jim had been welcomed with open arms and pride.

Now the scale had tipped the other way.

Old Carver cleared his throat and went on with what he had come to say.

"I don't hold with long engagements. you're only young once; you're neither of you getting any younger."

Jim Furnival's thin face flushed.

"Did Marion send you to say this?" he asked with an effort.

"No, she did not," said old Carver. "But she knew I was coming," he added.

He looked round the house with dissatisfied eyes as he went out; after the *nouveau*

riche grandeur of his own abode, it seemed very shabby and poor to him; this was not the sort of home he wished his daughter to occupy; now the scale had tipped he knew in his heart that he considered Jim Furnival a very poor catch indeed.

During the next few days he lost no opportunity to hint as much to his daughter; he was careful to say nothing directly, but his whole conversation when they were together was pointed subtly.

Marion understood what he meant, and it galled and irritated her; during the last four years she had grown to appreciate the wealth and luxury with which she was surrounded, and now—instead of looking eagerly forward to her marriage with Furnival, she shrank from ever thinking about it. A sick man, and a poor man to boot! there was not much romance in life after all.

She was not naturally a very strong character, and she was easily influenced; they say that eternal dropping will wear away a stone, and Marion was not stone; with subtle cleverness her father and Anstey between them undermined her love for Jim Furnival; they represented her marriage with him as one sordid grind to make ends meet and keep up appearances; old Carver told her plainly that she had nothing to expect from him.

"I made my money by hard and honest work," he said untruthfully. "Other men"—(meaning Jim)—"must do the same."

The climax came when Jim—on the slow road to recovery—began to awaken to the fact of Anstey's existence; he had heard his sisters talking, and what they said was like a shutter drawn from before his eyes.

He spoke to Marion about it, and demanded that she gave up Anstey's acquaintance; perhaps he was unnecessarily brutal in his earnestness, but his own disadvantage made him so.

He was ill, and without a shilling in the world, or prospects, Anstey was hale and strong, and with the world at his feet.

"I am not going to be dictated to," Marion said, with a quiver in her voice.

She was really terribly unhappy, without knowing in the very least what made her so, "I shall choose my own friends."

Jim's face hardened.

"You will not—if you are going to marry me," he said flintily.

She laughed at that.

"It does not seem as if I shall ever have the chance of marrying you," she said.

He took the knock as it was meant.

"You mean that I am not in a position to marry, and that Anstey is," he said with deadly calm.

Her brown eyes were misty with tears, but anger had her in its grip.

"Yes, that is what I do mean," she said, but her thoughts went back with unkind vividness to the little dark sitting-room behind the shop in the High Street where he had first kissed her, and the memory hurt insufferably.

"Then Anstey is more than welcome to you," was all Jim Furnival answered, and Marion took off her ring, and laid it down on the table between them.

There was a moment's silence, then she said hoarsely:

"I suppose this is what you have been wanting, ever since you came home," and Jim laughed as he answered drearily that perhaps it was.

She went away then, and he stood and listened to her retreating steps feeling as if a great door had slammed to across the whole world, shutting them one on either side.

It was all over the town the next morning that Marion Carver had broken her engagement with young Furnival; people who, four years ago, had held up amazed hands because young Furnival had stooped to Marion, now wagged their heads and said they were not surprised.

"He was no match for her," they said. "Ruined in health, and without a shilling to his name!" It was the tip of the scale indeed!

Every one guessed that Anstey was the cause of the final rupture, and in a way they were right.

He went round to see Marion as soon as the rumour reached him; she was crossing the hall when he was admitted, and re-

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ardless of the servant, he went up to her and caught her hand.

"Marion! is it true?"

"Is what true?" She knew quite well what he meant, but she shrank from admitting it to herself.

"That you have broken your engagement. I met Furnival, and he said it was true, but I could not believe it—I had to come to you."

She drew a hard breath, looking away from him, then—

"Yes, it's quite true," she said expressionlessly.

"Then—then is there . . . may I . . . oh Marion, does it mean . . ."

She broke away from him.

"Oh, not now! not now! I can't bear it."

She went to her room and locked herself in; she could not understand her own emotions; she had wished to be free, and now that she had got her freedom, she was more unhappy than ever in her life before.

"If I could only forget—if I could only forget," she kept telling herself, but she knew that the first happy memories of her engagement, the stolen meetings, and the kisses in the little dark room behind the shop, were all things which could never be forgotten.

When—a week later—Anstey pressed her for an answer, she said yes. Old Carver was delighted; he gave a champagne dinner to celebrate the occasion; he made a speech in which he said it was one of the happiest moments of his life.

He looked at his daughter guiltily as he said it, and she winced as if he had hurt her; for both their thoughts had gone back to the day of her engagement to Jim Furnival, and the bottle of indifferent port that had been opened and drunk in the little dark room behind the shop to celebrate their happiness, when old Carver had said just the same things, only with greater sincerity.

Oh, why could not things last! she wondered hopelessly; why must illness and poverty step in and spoil the beauty of romance!

Young Anstey took her home to his

people; they made a great fuss of her, and did all they could to make her happy, but in spite of everything she was miserable.

Though she tried hard to forget Jim Furnival, her thoughts were always with him; she was unutterably relieved when her visit came to an end and she went back home again.

She drove past the Furnivals' house on her way from the station, and she peered up at its windows with a racing pulse and quickly beating heart, just as she had done in the old days before Jim and she were anything to one another.

Where was he now? what was he doing? It seemed impossible that he had not come to meet her on her return, that there was not the pleasure of his delight to look forward to, at seeing her again.

It was not until the next morning that she heard what had happened to him: that three days ago, while crossing the High Street, he had been knocked down by an army lorry, and was lying between life and death in hospital.

One of the servants told her, and for a moment it seemed as if all the world had fallen away from her into utter blackness and chaos, as she stood listening.

Between life and death! that meant death of course! he would die, and she would never see him again! never tell him that already she had repented—that always she had loved him.

Her first impulse was to go to him, but reason checked her; she had no right to go now—they would not let her see him if she went; she did not even dare to call on his mother and sisters; she knew that if they had hated her before, they must hate her a thousand times more now for what she had done.

She wandered restlessly about the house, she could settle to nothing; she was afraid to question her father; afraid lest he should guess something of the terror and anguish of her heart.

Anstey was away from the town just then, for which she was unutterably thankful; she could not have tolerated his devotion.

The hours seemed endless—the long

spring evening without an end; when at last it began to get dark she put on her hat and crept out of the house.

She went up to the Furnivals' house, and stood trembling at the gate; the windows were in darkness, as if already Death had been there and taken its cruel toll of life, Marion longed to go and ask for news, but she was afraid; she dreaded the cold condemnation of Mrs. Furnival's eyes that were so like Jim's; at last she crept away again and went home.

Her father met her in the hall.

"Where have you been?" he asked, amazed.

"Only for a walk—it was so hot in the house."

They avoided looking at one another, and Marion went up to bed without bidding her father good night. He stood there in the expensive splendour of the hall and watched her go, trying not to hear the voice of the past that was whispering to him.

He went back to the dining-room and helped himself to a stiff glass of whisky.

"It's not my fault if the boy's dying," he told himself angrily. "It's not my fault—it's fate! that's what it is. . . ."

Upstairs Marion had undressed and crept into bed; she lay awake for hours staring into darkness that was peopled by torturous visions of the past; in her heart she blamed the war for having drawn the clouds about the sunshine of her happiness, knowing full well that only she herself was to blame; she cried and sobbed like a passionate child who resents punishment, knowing it to be just and deserved.

Finally she sobbed herself into an exhausted sleep. . . .

II

In the morning she found out who was the doctor attending Jim at the hospital, and unable to bear herself any longer she went to see him.

She told him what had happened, and of the mistake she had made.

"I have never really loved anybody but Jim," she said wildly. "I shall always love him; if he dies, I shall die too."

The doctor looked at her with kindly pity.

"I wish death was the worst we could promise him," he said sadly.

She raised terrified eyes.

"Oh, what do you mean?"

He told her as gently as he could: there had been injuries to the head, and if young Furnival lived, it was possible that he might never know any one or anything again.

She stared at him, white as death.

"You mean—madness!" she gasped.

He did not answer, but his silence was eloquent.

"And there is no hope—none?" she asked with stiff lips.

"There is a chance," he admitted reluctantly—"a very slender chance. An operation, of course, but it is dangerous, and most costly; his mother has not the money, but I doubt if she would consent."

The colour surged back to Marion's face.

"We have plenty; my father is a rich man; I will give anything—my last penny. . . ."

He shook his head sadly.

"I am afraid after what has happened, his people would not accept help from you," he said compassionately. "They are very proud and they cannot easily forgive."

"But they must! I will make them! Oh! surely *any* chance, no matter how dangerous, is better than letting him die, or live on as . . . as you say!"

The doctor smiled faintly.

"Perhaps if you were to see his mother. . . ." he said.

Marion fled back home; there was a letter in Anstey's writing waiting for her, but she took no notice of it; she sought her father; she poured out her story in an incoherent jumble.

"I love him—we must save him! Oh, father, with all your money. . . ."

He tried to repulse her, but he would not meet her eyes.

"Where is your pride?" he asked harshly. "You—engaged to another man. . . ."

"I never loved him! it was always Jim! always! Oh, you haven't forgotten how proud and pleased you were about it?—"

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how pleased mother was! Oh, if you ever cared for me at all . . . "

She was on her knees beside him, sobbing. Old Carver tried to raise her.

"You're excited—you don't know what you're talking about. You've done with Jim—you told him so," but his voice was less confident.

Marion looked up.

"Yes, I told him so—but it was a lie! If he dies, I've done with everything, for all my life. Oh, if we could only go back to the old days; we were happy then—in the little shop—and mother was here . . . "

She broke down, and for a moment there was silence; then old Carver put an arm round her.

"I'm a rich man," he said brokenly. "Any money you want—it's yours! take it, my dear—and . . . and I hope the boy recovers."

Marion went to Jim's mother; she went full of eagerness and hope, but the chill formality of the house damped her spirits; the old fear and sense of unwantedness almost overcame her as she was admitted; she shook in every limb as she crossed the hall to the shabby drawing-room.

Mrs. Furnival was there to receive her—aged, poor woman, by many hours of anxiety since last they met—and for a moment Marion's courage failed her; then, with sudden impulse, she held out her shaking hands.

"Oh, forgive me—forgive me! I loved him always—I love him now."

For an instant she thought she was to be repulsed, then the hard, worn face of the woman who was Jim's mother softened and broke, and the next moment they were crying in each other's arms. . . .

Presently Marion told her of her plans—of what the doctor had said, and of what her father had promised.

"And even if the chance is so small, you will take it, won't you?" she pleaded. "Somehow I feel that he will get well—that it will be all right; oh, he must! he must!"

In the end she prevailed; better be dead, than to live on as the doctors said he must live, if the chance was not taken. It was arranged that the operation should

be done, and at once—every hour lessened his chances.

"Even if he lives and the operation is successful, he may be an invalid for the rest of his life," his mother said, hiding her face.

Marion laughed.

"What does it matter? He will have you and me to love him and care for him," she said. . . .

There followed days of cruel anxiety: days when hope hung in the balance, and Marion's heart almost stopped beating with dread.

She had not been allowed to see Jim—nobody but nurses and doctors were admitted, and the time seemed to drag on leaden feet.

There was one nurse whom Marion always saw when she called at the hospital—a young woman with a sweet, lovable face, who was always cheery and kind, always hopeful and encouraging.

"Live! oh, I am sure he will! and be quite himself," she said once positively. "I know the doctors still fear for him, but somehow I *know* he will be all right."

Marion had written to young Anstey—she had told him quite candidly all that had happened, and sent him away; she had refused to see him, and after one or two attempts to persuade her, he let her alone.

She was thankful for this—she had dreaded a scene.

Then quite suddenly Jim took a turn for the better; the doctors smiled and looked pleased; the operation had been entirely successful; everything was going on quite normally.

"And when may I see him?" Marion asked eagerly; she was all passionate impatience to see him again.

"Ah, when!—you must have patience," so they always said, seeming to evade answering definitely, so she thought.

And then the blow fell.

Marion went up to Mrs. Furnival's one evening full of hope and cheeriness; it was glorious summer weather, and the world seemed full of the promise of happiness to come.

Already she dreamed of the time when Jim would be about and well again; al-

ready she was looking forward to their marriage, and the joy of being able to care for him and nurse him.

She did not deserve such happiness, she told herself; joys could not express her thankfulness.

But as soon as she saw Jim's mother, it was as if a rough hand had clutched at her heart, wringing away its joyousness; she swayed forward pale as a ghost.

"Oh, what is it? Jim! not—dead?"

"No, no . . . oh, my dear, you must try and be brave."

"Tell me—tell me," it was all she could say.

And then she heard—Jim, in his convalescence, had fallen in love with the pretty nurse, and was to marry her as soon as he was well enough.

Marion sat quite still, her hands gripped together; outside, the sun shone, and the birds sang, but it might have been bleakest winter for all she knew or cared.

Her punishment, which she had thought to avert, was here! it had fallen with a heavy hand, ruining her life.

Mrs. Furnival tried to comfort her, and tried to defend her son.

"It so often happens during long, severe illnesses—he was not normal, and she nursed him so devotedly."

"I know," Marion spoke the words with white lips; she was not blaming Jim—she knew she alone was to blame.

"And he never knew that it was through you—through your generosity," Mrs. Furnival went on in tears. "He never knew that but for you he would have died, or . . . or worse!"

Marion put her gently away; she rose and walked out of the house.

There was nothing more to hope for; fate had written 'Finis' across the book of her life.

If she could only die, and get away from this suffering! if she could only die!

A little river ran through one part of the town—she made her way subconsciously towards it.

The sun had gone now, and the water looked cold and dark in the grey light; it flowed so silently too—its depths were unster.

Marion closed her eyes; it would soon be over if she could just get one little spark of courage; then . . .

Some one was holding her hands, calling to her—

"Marion—Marion . . ."

She opened her eyes with a stifled shriek; she was sobbing convulsively.

Her father was bending over her, his face pale with alarm.

"Oh daddy! oh daddy!" She clung to him as she had done years ago when she was a child down at the little shop in the High Street.

Old Carver soothed her gently.

"There! there! dreaming, that's what it is! I was passing your door and heard you crying! It's only a dream! nothing to be afraid of."

"A dream!" she sat up with a gasp, there was no river, no grey night! she was at home in her own bedroom.

A dream! thank God! only a dream!—but—how much of it? she broke out into eager questioning.

"Jim! is it true that he's been hurt—or did I dream it?"

Mr. Carver frowned.

"What's it to do with you?—you've done with him."

Marion almost laughed.

"Done with him! I love him! If he'll forgive me and take me back, I shall be the happiest girl in the world."

She could get no more out of him; she was still dreaming, he told her curtly; in the morning perhaps she would be sensible.

He went away, and Marion lay awake all night, afraid to sleep any more.

As soon as it was light she got up and wrote to young Anstey; she was grieved to hurt him, she wrote, but she could not marry him.

"All my life I have only loved one man," she wrote. "I love him still . . ."

At breakfast time there was an angry scene with her father, but she did not care.

"If Jim won't have me, I shall never marry," she said firmly.

He stormed at her in vain.

"You'll not have a penny of my money."

"I don't want it," Marion said.

Later, she went up to Mrs. Furnival's

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the old fear and nervousness was upon her as she waited at the door; she flushed crimson when one of Jim's sisters opened it to her.

"Oh—could I see your mother?" she faltered.

The girl's face hardened.

"Mother never wishes to see you again," she said.

Marion turned away, a little lump in her throat; two parts of her dream had been but a dream then—her father's generosity, and Mrs. Furnival's forgiveness; she was afraid to hope that all the rest might prove to be a dream too.

She went to the hospital in dread—she waited in a little room while somebody fetched the Sister.

"If she is young and pretty," Marion told herself wildly, "I shall die."

The door opened behind her; a stout, grey-haired little woman entered.

"You have come to enquire about Mr. Furnival?" she asked kindly.

"Yes," Marion could hardly speak. "I—I . . . oh, is it true that he is very badly injured?"

"Not a bit," came the crisp reply. "I really don't know how such rumours get about; a few bruises, that's all, and a shaking——"

Marion was white to the lips.

"And he's not . . . not hurt—in the head?" she whispered.

The Sister smiled kindly.

"He's not hurt anywhere specifically," she said. "A few bruises, as I told you—it was a wonderful escape." She saw the relief in the girl's eyes. "Perhaps you would like to see him," she said kindly.

"Might I! oh, if only I could!"

"Certainly you may; he's in a room by himself—shall I tell him you are here?"

"Oh no; if I might just go in . . ."

She hardly knew what she was doing as

she followed the little grey-haired woman upstairs; she felt that she had gone blind when at last she stood in the room where Jim lay, and heard the door close behind her.

There was a moment's silence, then—

"Marion!" Young Furnival spoke her name hoarsely, incredulously.

She stumbled forward, and fell on her knees beside him.

"Oh, forgive me—I've been so wretched—I love you; I've always loved you . . ."

"Marion!" It was a cry of gladness now, as he raised himself from the pillow and took her into his arms.

Some time later—

"What will your father say?" he asked.

Marion laughed.

"Poor daddy! I'm afraid I don't mind what he says."

Presently:

"What will your mother say?" she asked apprehensively.

It was Jim's turn to laugh.

"Poor mother! I'm afraid I don't care what she says."

Later—

"Marion, we shall be very poor, my sweet."

"I don't mind."

She bent and kissed him.

"Jim!"

"Darling!"

"Is there any particular nurse who looks after you?" She could not meet his eyes as she asked her question.

"Yes—Nurse Mathews," he answered.

The colour rushed to her face.

"And is she—is she—pretty?"

Jim laughed.

"Good lord, no! she's one of the ugliest women I've ever seen."

Marion gave a sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad," she said softly.

But it was not till some time afterwards that she told him why.

Reynolds W. Myers

"SHE" MEETS ALLAN

By

H. RIDER HAGGARD

Author of "She," "Allan Quatermain," etc.

Illustrated by MAURICE GREIFFENHAGEN, A.R.A.

SYNOPSIS OF TWO PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS

Allan Quatermain, taking with him Umslopogaas and Hans, faithful followers on his previous travels, decides to visit the Northern Caves, where SHE is reported to be living in mysterious retirement.

After many adventures they reach the house of Captain Robertson, whose beautiful daughter, Inez, is captured shortly after their arrival by the Amahagger, a tribe of man-eating savages. The whole party sets off in pursuit of the raiders, overtakes them at the foot of a great cliff, and kills a large number. A few, however, escape with the unhappy Inez, whom they carry off on a stretcher. The white men are about to follow on their track, when a venerable old man appears suddenly from an adjacent kloof, attended by an escort of armed warriors.

CHAPTER XI

THROUGH THE CLEFT

"THESE do not seem to be friends of yours," I said, pointing to the fallen. "And yet," I added, nodding towards the spearmen who were now emerging from the gully, "they are very like your friends."

"Puppies from the same litter are often alike, yet, when they grow up, sometimes they fight each other," replied Father Christmas blandly. "At least these come to save and not to aid you. Look! they kill the others," and he pointed to them making an end of some of the wounded men. "But who are these?" and he glanced with evident astonishment, first at the fearful-looking Umslopogaas and then at the grotesque Hans. "Nay, answer not, you must be weary and need rest. Afterwards we can talk."

"Well, as a matter of fact, we have not yet breakfasted," I replied. "Also, I have business to attend to here," and I pointed to our wounded men.

The old fellow nodded, and went to speak to the captains of his force, doubtless as to the pursuit of the enemy, for presently I saw a company spring forward on their tracks. Then, assisted by Hans and the remaining Zulus, of whom one was Goroko, I turned to attend to our own people. The task proved lighter than I expected, since the badly injured man was dead or dying, and the hurts of the two others were in their legs, and comparatively slight, such as Goroko could doctor in his own native fashion. After this, taking Hans to guard my back, I went down to a little stream and washed myself. Then I returned and ate, wondering the while that I could do so with appetite after the terrible dangers which we had passed. Still, we had passed them, and Robertson, Umslopogaas, with three of his men, I and Hans, were quite unharmed, a fact for which I returned thanks in silence, but sincerely enough to Providence.

Hans also returned thanks in his own fashion, after he had filled himself, not before, and lit his corn-cob pipe. But Robertson made no remark; indeed, when he had satisfied his natural cravings, he rose and, walking a few paces forward, stood staring at the cleft in the mountain cliff into which he had seen the litter vanish that bore his daughter to some fate unknown. Even the great fight that we had fought, and the

This story has been abbreviated for serial purposes.

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victory we had won against overpowering odds, did not appear to impress him. He only glared at the mountain, into the heart of which Inez had been raped away, and shook his fist. Since she was gone, all else went for nothing, so much so that he did not offer to assist with the wounded Zulus or show curiosity about the strange old man by whom we had been rescued.

"The Great Medicine, Baas," said Hans, in his sententious way, "is even more powerful than I thought. Not only has it brought us safely through the fighting and without a scratch, for those Zulus there do not matter, and there will be less cooking now that they are gone; it has also brought down your reverend father, the Predikant, from the Place of Fires in Heaven, somewhat changed from what I remember him, it is true, but still without doubt the same. When I make my report to him presently, if he can understand my talk, I shall——"

"Stop your infernal nonsense, you son of a jackass," I broke in, for at this moment old Father Christmas, smiling more benignly than before, reappeared from the kloof into which he had vanished and advanced towards us, bowing with much politeness.

Having seated himself upon the little wall that we had built up, he contemplated us, stroking his beautiful white beard, then said, addressing me,

"Of a certainty you should be proud, who with a few have defeated so many. Still, had I not been ordered to come at speed, I think that now you would have been as those are," and he looked towards the dead Zulus, who were laid out at a distance like men asleep, while their companions sought for a place to bury them.

"Ordered by whom?" I asked.

"There is only one who can order," he answered, with mild astonishment, "She-who-Commands"—"She-who-is-Everlasting."

It occurred to me that this must be some Arabic idiom for the Eternal Feminine, but I only looked vague, and said,

"It would appear that there are some whom this exalted, everlasting She cannot command; those who attacked us, those

who have fled away yonder," and I waved my hand towards the mountain.

"No command is absolute; in every country there are rebels, even, as I have heard, in Heaven above us. But, Wanderer, what is your name?"

"Watcher-by-Night," I answered.

"Ah! a good name for one who must have watched well by night, and by day too, to reach this country living where She-who-Commands says that no man of your colour has set foot for many generations. Indeed, I think she told me once that two thousand years had gone by since she spoke to a white man in the City of Kôr."

"Did she indeed?" I exclaimed, stifling a cough.

"You do not believe me," he went on, smiling. "Well, She-who-Commands can explain matters for herself better than I who was not alive two thousand years ago, so far as I remember. But what must I call him with the Axe?"

"Slaughterer is his name."

"Again a good name, as, to judge by the wounds on them, certain of those rebels I think are now telling each other in Hell. And this man, if indeed he be a man," he added, looking doubtfully at Hans.

"Light-in-Darkness is his name."

"I see, doubtless because his colour is that of the winter sun in thick fog, or a bad egg broken into milk. And the other white man who mutters, and whose brow is like a storm?"

"He is called Avenger; you will learn why later on," I answered impatiently, for I grew tired of this catechism, adding, "And what are you called, and, if you are pleased to tell us, upon what errand do you visit us in so fortunate an hour?"

"I am named Billali," he answered, "the servant and messenger of She-who-Commands, and I was sent to save you and to bring you safely to her."

"How can this be, Billali, seeing that none knew of our coming?"

"Yet She-who-Commands knew," he said, with his benignant smile. "Indeed I think that she learned of it some moons ago through a message that was sent to her, and so arranged all things that you should be guided safely to her secret home, since

otherwise how would you have passed a great pathless swamp with the loss, I think she said, of but one man whom a snake bit?"

Now I stared at the old fellow, for how could he know of the death of this man? but thought it useless to pursue the conversation further.

"When you are rested and ready," he went on, "we will start. Meanwhile I leave you that I may prepare litters to carry those wounded men, and you also, Watcher-by-Night, if you wish." Then with a dignified bow, for everything about this old fellow was stately, he turned and vanished into the kloof.

The next hour or so was occupied in the burial of the dead Zulus, a ceremony in which I took no part beyond standing up and raising my hat as they were borne away, for it is best to leave natives alone on these occasions. Indeed, presently I lay down, reflecting that strangely enough there seemed to be something in old Zikali's tale of a wonderful white Queen who lived in a mountain fastness, since there was the mountain as he had drawn it on the ashes, and the servants of that Queen, who apparently had knowledge of our coming, appeared in the nick of time to rescue us from one of the tightest fixes in which ever I found myself. Moreover, the antique and courteous individual called Billali spoke of her as "She-who-is-Everlasting."

What the deuce could he mean by that, I wondered? Probably that she was very old and therefore disagreeable to look on, which I confessed to myself would be a disappointment. And how did she know that we were coming? I could not guess, and when I asked Robertson, he merely shrugged his shoulders and intimated that he took no interest in the matter.

The truth is, that nothing moved the man, whose whole soul was wrapped in one desire, namely, to rescue, or avenge, the daughter against whom he knew he had so sorely sinned. In fact, this loose-living but reformed seaman was becoming a monomaniac, and, what is more, one of the religious type. He had a Bible with him that had been given to him by his mother when he was a boy, and in this he read

constantly; also, he was always on his knees, and at night I could hear him groaning and praying aloud. Doubtless, now that the chains of drink had fallen off him, the instincts and the blood of the dour old Covenanters from whom he was descended were asserting themselves. In a way this was a good thing, though for some time past I had feared lest it should end in his going mad, and certainly, as a companion, he was more cheerful in his unregenerate days.

Abandoning speculation as useless, and taking my chance of being murdered where I lay, for after all Billali's followers were singularly like the men with whom we had been fighting, and, for aught I knew, might be animated by identical objects, I just went to sleep, as I can do at any time, to wake up an hour or so later feeling wonderfully refreshed. Hans, who when I closed my eyes was already slumbering at my feet, curled up like a dog on a spot where the sun struck hotly, roused me by saying,

"Awake, Baas, they are here!"

I sprang up, snatching at my rifle, for I thought that he meant that we were being attacked again, to see Billali advancing at the head of a train of four litters made of bamboo, with grass mats for curtains and coverings, each of which was carried by stalwart Amahaggers, as I supposed that they must be. Two of these, the finest, he indicated were for Robertson and myself, and the two others for the wounded. Umslopogaas and the remaining Zulus evidently were expected to walk, as was Hans.

"How did you make these so quickly?" I asked, surveying their elegant and indeed artistic workmanship.

"We did not make them, Watcher-by-Night; we brought them with us folded up. She-who-Commands looked in her glass and said that four would be needed, besides my own, which is yonder, two for white lords and two for wounded blackmen, which you see is the number required."

"Yes," I answered vaguely, marvelling what kind of a glass it was that gave the lady this information.

Before I could inquire upon the point, Billali added,

"You will be glad to learn that my men

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caught some of those rebels who dared to attack you, eight or ten of them who had been hurt by your missiles or axe-cuts, and put them to death in the proper fashion, yes, quite the proper fashion," and he smiled a little. "The rest had gone too far, where it would have been dangerous to follow them among the rocks. Enter now, my lord Watcher-by-Night, for the road is steep, and if we would reach the place where She-who-Commands is camped in the ancient holy city before the moon sinks behind the cliffs to-night, we must travel fast."

So, having explained matters to Robertson and Umslopogaas, who announced that nothing would induce *him* to be carried like an old woman or a corpse upon a shield, and seen that the hurt Zulus were comfortably accommodated, Robertson and I got into our litters, which proved to be delightfully easy and restful. Then our gear having been collected by the hook-nosed bearers to whom we were obliged to trust it, though we kept with us our rifles and a certain amount of ammunition, we started. First went a number of Billali's spearmen, then came the litters with the wounded, alongside of which Umslopogaas and his three uninjured Zulus stalked or trotted; then another litter containing Billali; then my own, by which ran Hans, and Robertson's; and lastly the rest of the Amahagger and the relief bearers.

"I see now, Baas," said Hans, thrusting his head between my curtains, "that yonder Whitebeard cannot be your reverend father, the Predikant, after all."

"Why not?" I asked, though the thing was fairly obvious.

"Because, Baas, if he were, he would not have left Hans, of whom he always thought so well, to run in the sun like a dog, while he and others travel in carriages like great white ladies."

"You had better save your breath instead of talking nonsense, Hans," I said, "since I believe that you have a long way to go."

In fact it proved to be a very long way indeed, especially as after we began to breast the mountain we must travel slowly. We started about ten o'clock in the morning, for the fight, which after all did

not take long, had, it will be remembered, begun shortly after dawn, and it was three in the afternoon before we reached the base of the towering cliff which I have mentioned. Here, at the foot of a curious isolated column of rock, on which I was destined to see a strange sight in the after days, we halted and ate of the remaining food which we had brought with us, while the Amahagger consumed their own, which seemed to consist largely of curdled milk, such as the Zulus call *mass*, and lumps of a kind of bread. I noted that they were a very curious people, who fed in silence, and on whose handsome, solemn faces one never saw a smile. Somehow they gave me the creeps to look at, and Robertson was affected in the same way, for in one of the rare intervals of his abstraction he remarked that they were "no canny." Then he added,

"Ask yon old wizard, who might be one of the Bible prophets come to life, what those man-eating devils have done with my daughter."

I did so, and Billali answered,

"Say that they have taken her away to make a queen of her, since, having rebelled against their own queen, they must have another who is white. Say too that She-who-Commands will wage war on them and perhaps win her back, unless they kill her first."

"Ah!" he repeated, when I had translated, "unless they kill her first—or worse." Then he relapsed into his usual silence.

Presently we started on again, heading straight for what looked like a sheer wall of black rock a thousand feet or more in height, along a path so steep that Robertson and I got out and walked, or rather scrambled up it, in order to ease the bearers. Billali, I noticed, remained in his litter. The convenience of the bearers did not trouble him; he only ordered an extra gang to the poles. I could not imagine how we were to negotiate this precipice. Nor could Umslopogaas, who looked at it, and said,

"If we are to climb that, Macmazahn, I think that the only one who will live to get to the top will be that little yellow monkey



At length we came to the cliff face, where, to all appearance, our journey must end. Suddenly, however, out of the blind black wall in front of us started the apparition of a tall man armed with a great spear and wearing a white robe, who challenged us hoarsely.

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of yours," and he pointed with his axe at Hans.

"If I do," replied that worthy, much nettled, for he hated to be called a yellow monkey by the Zulus, "be sure that I will roll down stones upon any black butcher whom I see sprawling upon the cliff below."

Umslopogaas smiled grimly, for he had a sense of humour, and could appreciate a repartee even when it hit him hard. Then we stopped talking, for the climb took all our breath.

At length we came to the cliff face, where, to all appearance, our journey must end. Suddenly, however, out of the blind black wall in front of us started the apparition of a tall man armed with a great spear and wearing a white robe, who challenged us hoarsely. Yes, suddenly he stood before us, as a ghost might do, though whence he came we could not see.

Presently the mystery was explained. Here in the cliff face there was a cleft, though one invisible even from a few paces away, since its outer edge projected over the inner wall of rock. Moreover, this opening was not above four feet in width, a mere split in the huge mountain mass caused by some Titanic convulsion in past ages. For it was a definite split, since, once entered, far, far above could be traced a faint line of light coming from the sky, although the gloom of the passage was such that torches, which were stored at hand, must be used by those who threaded it. One man could have held the place against a hundred, until he was killed. Still it was guarded, not only at the mouth where the warrior had appeared, but further along at every turn in the jagged chasm; and these were many.

Into this grim place we went. The Zulus did not like it at all, for they are a light-loving people, and I noted that even Umslopogaas seemed scared, and hung back a little. Nor did Hans, who, with his usual suspicion, feared some trap; nor, for the matter of that, did I, though I thought it well to appear much interested. Only Robertson seemed quite indifferent, and trudged along stolidly after a man carrying a torch.

Old Billali put his head out of the litter and shouted back to me to fear nothing,

since there were no pitfalls in the path, his voice echoing strangely between those narrow walls of measureless height.

For half an hour or more we pursued this dreary, winding path, round the corners of which the draught tore in gusts so fierce that more than once the litters with the wounded men and those who bore them were nearly blown over. It was safe enough, however, since on either side of us, smooth and without break, rose the sheer walls of rock over which lay the tiny ribbon of blue sky. At length the cleft widened somewhat, and the light grew stronger, making the torches unnecessary.

Then of a sudden we came to its end, and found ourselves upon a little plateau in the mountainside. Behind us for a thousand feet or so rose the sheer rock wall as it did upon the outer face, while in front and beneath, far beneath, was a beautiful plain, circular in shape and of great extent, which plain was everywhere surrounded, so far as I could see, by the same wall of rock. In short, notwithstanding its enormous size, without doubt it was neither more nor less than the crater of a vast extinct volcano. Lastly, not far from the centre of this plain, was what appeared to be a city, since through my glasses I could see great walls built of stone and what I thought were houses, all of them of a character more substantial than any that at this time I had discovered in the wilds of Africa.

I went to Billali's litter, and asked him who lived in the city.

"No one," he answered; "it has been dead for thousands of years, but She-who-Commands is camped there at present with an army, and thither we go at once. Forward, bearers!"

So, Robertson and I having re-entered our litters, we started on down hill at a rapid pace, for the road, though steep, was safe and kept in good order. All the rest of that afternoon we travelled, and by sunset reached the edge of the plain, where we halted a while to rest and eat, till the light of the growing moon grew strong enough to enable us to proceed. Umslopogaas came up and spoke to me.

"Here is a fortress indeed, Macumazahn,"

CHAPTER XII

THE WHITE WITCH

he said, "since none can climb that fence of rock in which the holes seem to be few and small."

"Yes," I answered, "but it is one out of which those who are in would find it difficult to get out. We are buffalo in a pit, Umslopogaas."

"That is so," he answered; "I have thought it already. But if any would meddle with us, we still have our horns and can toss for a while."

Then he went back to his men.

The sunset in that great solemn place was a wonderful thing to see. First of all, the measureless crater was filled with light like a bowl with fire. Then, as the great orb sank behind the western cliff, half of the plain became quite dark, while shadows seemed to rush forward over the eastern part of its surface, till that too was swallowed up in gloom, and for a little while there remained only a glow reflected from the cliff face and from the sky above, while on the crest of the parapet of rock played strange and glorious fires. Presently these too vanished, and the world was dark.

Then the half moon broke from behind a bank of clouds, and by its silver, uncertain light we struggled forward across the flat plain, rather slowly now, for even the iron muscles of those bearers grew tired. I could not see much of it, but I gathered that we were passing through crops, very fine crops to judge by their height, as doubtless they would be upon this lava soil; also once or twice we splashed through streams.

At length, being tired and lulled by the swaying of the litter and by the sound of a weird, low chant that the bearers had set up now that they neared home and were afraid of no attack, I sank into a doze. When I awoke again, it was to find that the litter had halted, and to hear the voice of Billali say,

"Descend, White Lords, and come with your companions, the Black Slaughterer and the yellow man who is named Light-in-Darkness. She-who-Commands desires to see you at once before you eat and sleep, and must not be kept waiting. Fear not for the others, they will be cared for till you return."

I DESCENDED from the litter, and told the others what the old fellow had said. Robertson did not want to come, and indeed refused to do so until I suggested to him that such conduct might prejudice a powerful person against us. Umslopogaas was indifferent, putting, as he remarked, no faith in a ruler who was a woman. Only Hans, although he was so tired, acquiesced with some eagerness, the fact being that his brain was more alert, and that he had all the curiosity of the monkey tribe which he so much resembled in appearance, and wanted to see this queen whom Zikali revered.

In the end we started, conducted by Billali and by men who carried torches whereof the light showed me that we were passing between houses, or at any rate walls that had been those of houses, and along what seemed to be a paved street.

Walking under what I took to be a great arch or portico, we came into a court that was full of towering pillars but unroofed, for I could see the stars above. At its end we entered a building of which the doorway was hung with mats, to find that it was lighted with lamps, and that all down its length on either side guards armed with long spears stood at intervals.

"Oh! Baas," said Hans hesitatingly, "this is the mouth of a trap," while Umslopogaas glared about him suspiciously, fingering the handle of his great axe.

"Be silent," I answered. "All this mountain is a trap, therefore another does not matter, and we have our pistols."

Walking forward between the double line of guards, who stood immovable as statues, we came to some curtains hung at the end of a long narrow hall which, although I know little of such things, were, I noted, made of rich stuff embroidered in colours and with golden threads. Before these curtains Billali motioned to us to halt. Then, after a whispered colloquy with some one beyond carried on through the join of the curtains, he vanished between them, leaving us alone for five minutes or more. At length they opened,

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and a tall and elegant woman, with an Arab cast of countenance and clad in white robes, appeared and beckoned to us to enter. She did not speak or answer when I spoke to her, which was not wonderful, as afterwards I discovered that she was a mute. We went in, I wondering very much what we were going to see.

On the further side of the curtains was a room of no great size illumined with lamps, of which the light fell upon sculptured walls. It looked to me as though it might once have been the inmost court or a sanctuary of some temple, for at its head was a dais, upon which once perhaps had stood the shrine or statue of a god. On this dais there was now a couch, and on the couch—a goddess!

There she sat, straight and still, clothed in shining white and veiled, but with her draperies so arranged that they emphasised rather than concealed the wonderful elegance of her tall form. Moreover, from beneath the veil, which was such as a bride wears, appeared two plaits of glossy, raven hair of great length, to the end of each of which was suspended a single large pearl. On either side of her stood a tall woman like to her who had led us through the curtains, and on his knees in front, but to the right, knelt Billali.

About this seated personage there was an air of singular majesty, such as might pervade a queen as fancy paints her, though she had a nobler figure than any queen I ever saw depicted. Mystery seemed to flow from her; it clothed her like the veil she wore, which of course heightened the effect. Beauty flowed from her also; although it was shrouded, I knew that it was there, no veil or coverings could obscure it, at least to my imagination. Moreover, she breathed out power; one felt it in the air as one feels a thunderstorm before it breaks, and it seemed to me that this power was not quite human, that it drew its strength from afar, and dwelt a stranger to the earth.

To tell the truth, although my curiosity, always strong, was enormously excited, and though now I felt glad that I had attempted this journey with all its perils, I was horribly afraid, so much afraid that I should

have liked to turn and run away. From the beginning I knew myself to be in the presence of an unearthly being clothed in soft and perfect woman's flesh, something alien, too, and different from humanity.

What a picture it all made! There she sat, quiet and stately as a perfect marble statue; only her breast, rising and falling beneath the white robe, showed that she was alive and breathed as others do. Another thing showed it also—her eyes. At first I could not see them through the veil, but presently, either because I grew accustomed to the light, or because they brightened as those of certain animals have power to do when they watch intently, it ceased to be a covering to them. Distinctly I saw them now, large and dark and splendid, with a tinge of deep blue in the iris, alluring and yet awful in their majestic aloofness, which seemed to look through and beyond, to embrace all without seeking and without effort. Those eyes were like windows through which light flows from within, the light of the spirit.

I glanced round to see the effect of this vision upon my companions. It was most peculiar. Hans had sunk to his knees, his hands were joined in the attitude of prayer, and his ugly little face reminded me of that of a big fish out of water and dying from excess of air. Robertson, startled out of his abstraction, stared at the royal woman on the couch with his mouth open.

"Man," he whispered, "I've got them back, although I have touched nothing for weeks, only this time they are lovely. For you's no human lady, I feel it in my bones."

Umslopogaas stood great and grim, his hands resting on the handle of his tall axe, and stared also, the blood pulsing against the skin that covered the hole in his head.

"Watcher-by-Night," he said to me in his deep voice, but also speaking in a whisper, "this chiefness is not one woman, but all women. Beneath those robes of hers I seem to see the beauty of one who has gone beyond, of the Lily who is lost to me. Do you not feel it thus, Macumazahn?"

Now that he mentioned it, certainly I did; indeed I had felt it all along, although



On either side of her stood a tall woman like to her who had led us through the curtains, and on his knees in front, but to the right, knelt Bullali.

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amid the rush of sensations this one had scarcely disentangled itself in my mind. I looked at the draped shape, and saw—well, never mind whom I saw; it was not one only, but several in sequence; also a woman who at that time I did not know, although I came to know her afterwards, too well perhaps, or at any rate quite enough to puzzle me. The odd thing was that in this hallucination the personalities of these individuals seemed to overlap and merge, till at last I began to wonder whether they were not parts of the same entity or being, manifesting itself in sundry shapes, yet springing from the same centre, as different coloured rays of light flow from the same crystal, while the beams from the source of light shift and change. But the thing is too metaphysical for my poor powers to express as clearly as I would. Also, no doubt it was but an hallucination that had its origin, perhaps, in the mischievous brain of her who sat before us.

At length she spoke, and her voice sounded like silver bells heard over water in a great calm. It was low and sweet, oh! so sweet that at its first notes for a moment my senses seemed to swoon and my pulse to stop. It was to me that she addressed herself.

"My servant here," and ever so slightly she turned her head towards the kneeling Billali, "tells me that you who are named *Watcher-in-the-Night*, understand the tongue in which I speak to you. Is it so?"

"I understand Arabic of a kind well enough, having learned it on the East Coast and from Arabs in past years, but not such Arabic as you use, O——" and I paused.

"Call me *Hiya*," she broke in, "which is my title here, meaning, as you know, *She*, or *Woman*. Or, if that does not please you, call me *Ayesha*. It would rejoice me after so long to hear the name I bore spoken by the lips of one of my colour and of gentle blood."

I blushed at the compliment so artfully conveyed, and repeated stupidly enough.

"Not such Arabic as you use, O—*Ayesha*."

"I thought that you would like the sound of the word better than that of *Hiya*, though afterwards I will teach you to pro-

nounce it as you should, O—have you any other name save *Watcher-by-Night*, which seems also to be a title?"

"Yes," I answered; "Allan."

"O—Allan. Tell me of these," she went on quickly, indicating my companions with a sweep of her slender hand, "for they do not speak Arabic, I think. Or stay, I will tell you of them, and you shall say if I do so rightly. This one," and she nodded towards Robertson, "is a man bemused. There comes from him a colour which I see though you cannot, and that colour betokens a desire for revenge, though I think that in his time he has desired other things also, as I remember men always did from the beginning, to their ruin. Human nature does not change, O Allan, and wine and women are ancient snares. Enough of him for this time. The little yellow one there is afraid of me, as all of you are. That is woman's greatest power, although she is so weak and gentle, men are still afraid of her just because they are so stupid that they cannot understand her. To them, after a million years, she still remains the Unknown, and to us upon the Earth all the Unknown is also the terrible.

"Now of the last, this *Black One*. Here I think is a man indeed, a warrior of warriors, such as there used to be in the early world, if a savage. Well, believe me, Allan, savages are often the best. Moreover, all are still savage at heart, even you and I. For what is termed culture is but coat upon coat of paint laid on to hide our native colour, and often there is poison in the paint. That axe of his has drunk deep, I think, though always in fair fight, and I say that it shall drink deeper yet. Have I read these men aright, O Allan?"

"Not so ill," I answered.

"I thought it," she said, with a musical laugh, "although at this place I rust and grow dull like an unused sword. Now you would rest. Go—all of you. To-morrow you and I will talk alone. Fear nothing for your safety; you are watched by my slaves, and I watch my slaves. Till to-morrow then, farewell. Go now, eat and sleep, as, alas, we all must do who linger on this ball of earth and cling to a life we should do well to lose. Billali, conduct

them hence," and she waved her hand to signify that the audience was ended.

At this sign Hans, who apparently was still much afraid, rose from his knees and literally bolted through the curtains. Robertson followed him. Umslopogaas stood a moment, drew himself up, and, lifting the great axe, cried *Bayéle*, after which he too turned and went.

"What does that word mean, O Allan?" she asked.

I explained that it was the salutation which the Zulu people only give to kings.

"Did I not say that savages are often the best?" she exclaimed, in a gratified voice.

"The white man, your companion, gave me no salute, but the Black One knows when he stands before a woman who is royal."

"He too is of royal blood in his own land," I said.

"If so, we are akin, O Allan."

Then I bowed deeply to her in my best manner, and, rising from her couch for the first time, she stood up, looking very tall and commanding, and bowed back.

After this I went, to find the others on the further side of the curtains, except Hans, who had run down the long narrow hall and through the mats at its end. We followed, marching with dignity behind Billali between the double line of guards, who raised their spears as we passed them, and on the further side of the mats discovered Hans, still looking terrified.

"Baas," he said to me as we threaded our way through the court of columns, "in my life I have seen all kinds of dreadful things and faced them, but never have I been so much afraid as I am of that white witch. Baas, I think that she is the devil of whom you reverend father, the Predikant, used to talk so much, or perhaps his wife."

"If so, Hans," I answered, "the devil is not so black as he is painted. But I advise you to be careful of what you say, as she may have long ears."

"It doesn't matter at all what one says, Baas, because she reads thoughts before they pass the lips. I felt her doing it there in that room. And do you be careful, Baas, or she will eat up your spirit and make you fall in love with her, who, I expect, is very ugly indeed, since otherwise she would

not wear a veil. Whoever saw a pretty woman tie up her head in a sack, Baas?"

"Perhaps she does this because she is so beautiful, Hans, that she fears the hearts of men who look upon her would melt."

"Oh! no, Baas, all women want to melt men's hearts; the more the better. They seem to have other things in their minds, but really they think of nothing else until they are too old and ugly, and it takes them a long while to be sure of that."

So Hans went on talking his shrewd nonsense, till, following so far as I could see the same road as that by which we had come, we reached our quarters, where we found food prepared for us, broiled goat's flesh with corncakes and milk, I think it was, also beds for us two white men covered with skin rugs and blankets woven of wool.

These quarters, I should explain, consisted of rooms in a house built of stone, of which the walls had once been painted. The roof of the house was gone now, for we could see the stars shining above us, but as the air was very soft in this sheltered plain, this was an advantage rather than otherwise. The largest room was reserved for Robertson and myself, while another at the back was given to Umslopogaas and his Zulus, and a third to the two wounded men. Billali showed us these arrangements by the light of lamps, and apologised that they were not better, because, as he explained, the place was a ruin, and there had been no time to build us a house. He added that we might sleep without fear, as we were guarded, and none would dare to harm the guests of She-who-Commands, on whom he was sure we, or at any rate I and the Black Slaughterer, had produced an excellent impression. Then he bowed himself out, saying that he would return in the morning, and left us to our own devices.

Robertson and I sat down on stools that had been set for us, and ate, but he seemed so overcome by his experiences, or by his sombre thoughts, that I could not draw him into conversation. All he remarked was that we had fallen into queer company, and that those who supped with Satan needed a long spoon. Having delivered himself of this sentiment, he threw himself upon the

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bed, prayed aloud for a while, as had become his fashion, to be "protected from warlocks and witches" amongst other things, and went to sleep.

Before I turned in I visited Umslopogaas's room to see that all was well with him and his people, and found him standing in the doorway staring at the star-spangled sky.

"Greeting, Macumazahn," he said. "You who are white and wise, and I who am black and a warrior, have seen many strange things beneath the sun, but never such a one as we have looked upon to-night. Who and what is that chieftainess, Macumazahn?"

"I do not know," I said, "but it is worth while to have lived to look upon her, even though she be veiled."

"Nor do I, Macumazahn. Nay, I do know, for my heart tells me that she is the greatest of all witches, and that you will do well to guard your spirit lest she should steal it away. If she were not a witch, should I have seemed to behold the shape of Nada the Lily, who was the wife of my youth, beneath those white robes of hers, and, though the tongue in which she spoke was strange to me, to hear the murmur of Nada's voice from between her lips, of Nada who has gone further from me than those stars. It is good that you wear the Great Medicine of Zikali upon your breast, Macumazahn, for perhaps it will shield you from harm at those hands that are shaped of ivory."

"Zikali is another of the tribe," I answered, laughing, "although less beautiful to see. Also I am not afraid of any of them, and from this one, if she be more than some white woman whom it pleases to veil herself, I shall hope to gather wisdom."

"Aye, Macumazahn, such wisdom as spirits and the dead have to give."

"Mayhap, Umslopogaas, but we came here to seek spirits and the dead, did we not?"

"Aye," answered Umslopogaas, "these and war, and I think that we shall find enough of all three. Only I hope that war will come the first, lest the spirits and the dead should bewitch me and take away my skill and courage."

Then we parted, and, too tired even to wonder any more, I threw myself down on my bed and slept.

I was awakened, when the sun was already high, by the sound of Robertson, who was on his knees, praying aloud as usual, a habit of his which I confess got on my nerves. Prayer, in my opinion, is a private matter between man and his Creator, that is, except in church; further, I did not in the least wish to hear all about Robertson's sins, which seemed to have been many and peculiar. It is bad enough to have to bear the burden of one's own transgressions without learning of those of other people, that is, unless one is a priest and must do so professionally. So I jumped up to escape and make arrangements for a wash, only to butt into old Billali, who was standing in the doorway contemplating Robertson with much interest and stroking his white beard.

He greeted me with his courteous bow, and said,

"Tell your companion, O Watcher, that it is not necessary for him to go upon his knees to She-who-Commands—and must be obeyed," he added with emphasis, "when he is not in her presence, and that even then he would do well to keep silent, since so much talking in a strange tongue might annoy her."

I burst out laughing, and answered,

"He does not go upon his knees and pray to She-who-Commands, but to the Great One in the sky."

"Indeed, Watcher. Well, we only know a Great One who is upon the earth, though it is true that perhaps she visits the skies sometimes."

"Is it so, Billali?" I answered incredulously. "And now I would ask you to take me to some place where I can bathe."

"It is ready," he replied. "Come."

So I called to Hans, who was hanging about with a rifle on his arm, to follow with a cloth and soap, of which fortunately we had a couple of pieces left, and we started along what had once been a paved roadway running between stone houses, of which the time-eaten ruins still remained on either side.

"Who and what is this Queen of yours."

"Billali?" I asked, as we went. "Surely she is not of the Amahagger blood."

"Ask it of herself, O Watcher, for I cannot tell you. All I know is that I can trace my own family for ten generations, and that my tenth forefather told his son on his deathbed, for the saying has come down through his descendants, that when he was young, She-who-Commands had ruled the land for more hundreds of years than he could count months of life."

I stopped and stared at him, since the he was so amazing that it seemed to deprive me of the power of motion. Noting my very obvious disbelief, he continued blandly,

"If you doubt, ask. And now here is where you may wash."

Then he led me through an arched doorway, and down a wrecked passage to what very obviously had once been a splendid bath-house, such as some I have seen pictures of that were built by the Romans. Its size was that of a large room; it was constructed of a kind of marble with a sloping bottom that varied from three to seven feet in depth, and water still ran in and out of it through large glazed pipes. Moreover, around it was a footway about five feet across, from which opened chambers, unroofed now, that the bathers once used as dressing-rooms, while between these chambers stood the remains of statues. One at the end indeed, where an alcove had protected it from sun and weather, was still quite perfect, except for the outstretched arms which were gone (the right hand I noticed lying at the bottom of the bath). It was that of a nude young woman in the attitude of diving, a very beautiful bit of work, I thought, though of course I am no judge of sculpture, even the smile mingled with trepidation upon the girl's face being most naturally portrayed.

This statue showed two things, that the bath was used by females, and that the people who had built it were highly civilised, and they belonged to an advanced if somewhat Eastern race, since the girl's nose was, if anything, Semitic in character, and her lips, though prettily shaped, were full. For the rest, the basin was so clean that I found it must have been made ready for me or other recent bathers, and at its

bottom I discovered gratings and broken pipes of earthenware, which suggested that in the old days the water could be warmed by means of a furnace.

In this relic of a long-past civilisation, which excited Hans even more than it did myself, since, having never seen anything of the sort, he thought it so strange that, as he informed me, he imagined that it must have been built by witchcraft, I had a most delightful bathe. Even Hans was persuaded to follow my example, a thing I had rarely known him do before, and, seated in its shallowest part, splashed some water over his yellow wrinkled anatomy. Then we returned to our house, where I found an excellent breakfast had been provided which was brought to us by tall, silent, handsome women, who surveyed us out of the corners of their eyes, but said nothing at all.

Shortly after I had finished my meal, Billali, who had disappeared, came back again and said that She-who-Commanded desired my presence as she would speak with me; also that I must come alone. So, after attending to the wounded, who both seemed to be getting on well, I went, followed by Hans armed with his rifle, though I only carried my revolver.

Robertson wished to accompany me, as he did not seem to care about being left alone with the Zulus in that strange place, but Billali would not allow it. Indeed, when he persisted, two great men stepped forward and crossed their spears before him in a somewhat threatening fashion. Then, at my entreaty, for I feared lest trouble should arise, he gave in and returned to the house.

Following our path of the night before, we walked up a ruined street which I could see was only one of scores in what had once been a very great city, until we came to the archway that I have mentioned, a great one now overgrown with plants which, from their yellow, sweet-scented bloom, I judged to be a species of wallflower, also with a kind of houseleek or saxifrage. Here Hans was stopped by guards, Billali explaining to me that he must await my return, an order which he obeyed unwillingly enough. Then I went on down the narrow passage, hindered as before by guards, who stood silent as statues, and came to the curtains at the end

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Here, at a motion from Billali, who did not seem to dare to speak in this place, I stood still and waited.

CHAPTER XIII

ALLAN HEARS A STRANGE TALE

FOR some minutes I remained before those curtains until, had it not been for something electric in the air which got into my bones, a kind of force that, perhaps in my fancy only, seemed to pervade the place, I should certainly have grown bored. Indeed I was about to ask my companion why he did not announce our arrival instead of standing there like a stuck pig with his eyes shut as though in prayer or meditation, when the curtains parted, and from between them appeared one of those tall waiting-women whom we had seen on the previous night. She contemplated us gravely for a few moments, then moved her hand twice, once forward towards Billali as a signal to him to retire, which he did with great rapidity, and next in a beckoning fashion towards myself as a signal to me to follow her.

I obeyed, passing between the thick curtains, which she fastened in some way behind me, and found myself in the same roofed and sculptured room that I have already described. Only now there were no lamps, such light as penetrated it coming from an opening above that I could not see and falling upon the dais at its head, also on her who sat upon the dais.

Yes, there she sat in her white robes and veil, the point and centre of a little lake of light, a wondrous and in a sense a spiritual vision, for in truth there was something about her which was not of the world, something that drew and yet frightened me. Still as a statue she sat, like one to whom time is of no account, and who has grown weary of motion, and on either side of her, yet more still, like caryatides supporting a shrine, stood two of the stately women who were her attendants. For the rest a sweet and subtle odour pervaded the chamber which took hold of my senses as hachich might do, which I was sure proceeded from her, or from her garments, for I could see no perfumes burning. She

spoke no word, yet I knew she was inviting me to come nearer, and moved forward till I reached a curious carved chair that was placed just beneath the dais, and there halted, not liking to sit down without permission.

For a long while she contemplated me, for as before I could feel her eyes searching me from head to foot, and, as it were, looking through me as though she would discover my very soul.

Then at length she moved, waving those two ivory arms of hers outwards with a kind of swimming stroke, whereon the women to right and left of her turned and glided away, I know not whither.

"Sit, Allan," she said, "and let us talk. for I think we have much to say to each other. Have you slept well? And eaten though I fear that the food is but rough? Also was the bath made ready for you?"

"Yes, O Ayesha," I answered to all three questions, adding, for I knew not what to say, "It seems to be a very ancient bath."

"When last I saw it," she replied, "it was well enough, with statues standing round it worked by a sculptor who had seen beauty in his dreams. But in two thousand years—or is it more?—the tooth of Time bites deep, and doubtless, like all else in this dead place, it is now a ruin."

I coughed to cover up the exclamation of disbelief that rose to my lips, and remarked blandly that two thousand years was certainly a long time.

"When you say one thing, Allan, and mean another, your Arabic is even more vile than usual, and does not serve to cloak your thought."

"It may be so, O Ayesha, for I only know that tongue, as I do many other of the dialects of Africa, by learning it from common men. My own speech is English, in which, if you are acquainted with it, I should prefer to talk."

"I know not English, which doubtless is some language that has arisen since I left the world. Perhaps by and by you shall teach it to me, but I tell you, you anger me whom it is not well to anger, because you believe nothing that passes my lips, and yet do not dare to say so."

"How can I believe one, O Ayesha, who,

if I understand aright, speaks of having seen a certain bath two thousand years ago, whereas one hundred years are man's utmost days? Forgive me, therefore, if I cannot believe what I know to be untrue."

Now I thought that she would be very angry, and was sorry that I had spoken. But, as it happened, she was not.

"You must have courage to give me the lie so boldly, and I like courage," she said, "who have been cringed to for so long. Indeed, I know that you are brave, who have heard how you bore yourself in the fight yesterday, and much else about you. I think that we shall be friends, but—seek no more."

"What else should I seek, O Ayesha?" I asked innocently.

"Now you are lying again," she said, "who know well that no man who is a man sees a woman who is beautiful and pleases him, without wondering, should he desire it, if she could come to love him, that is, if she be young."

"That at least is not possible when she has seen two thousand years, after which time naturally she would prefer to wear a veil," I exclaimed boldly, seeking to avoid the argument into which I saw she wished to drag me.

"Ah!" she answered, "I think the little yellow man who is named Light-in-Darkness put that thought into your heart. Oh! do not trouble as to how I know it, who have many spies here, as he guessed well enough. So a woman who has lived two thousand years must be hideous and wrinkled, must she? The stamp of youth and loveliness must long have fled from her; of that you, the wise man, are sure. Very well. Now you tempt me to do what I had determined I would not do, and you shall pluck the fruit of the tree of curiosity which grows so fast within you. Look, O Allan, and say whether I am old and hideous, even though I have lived two thousand years upon the earth, and mayhap many more."

Then she lifted her hands and did something to her veil, so that for a moment, on y one moment, her face was revealed, after which the veil fell into its place.

I looked, I saw, and if that chair had lacked a back, I believe that I should have

fallen out of it to the ground. As for what I saw—well, it cannot be described, at any rate by me, except perhaps as a flash of glory. Every man has dreamed of perfect beauty, basing his ideas of it perhaps on that of some woman he has met who chanced to take his fancy, with a few accessories from splendid pictures or Greek statues thrown in, plus a garnishment of the imagination. At any rate I have, and here was that perfect beauty multiplied by ten, such beauty, that at the sight of it the senses reeled. And yet I repeat that it is not to be described. I do not know what the nose or the lips were like; in fact, all that I can remember with distinctness is the splendour of the eyes, of which I had caught some hint through her veil on the previous night. Oh! they were wondrous, those eyes, but I cannot tell their colour, save that the groundwork of them was black. Moreover, they seemed to be more than eyes as we understand them. They were indeed windows of the soul, out of which looked thought and majesty and infinite wisdom, mixed with all the allurements and the mystery that we are accustomed to see or to imagine in woman.

Here let me say something at once. If this marvellous creature expected that the revelation of her splendour was going to make me her slave, to cause me to fall in love with her, as it is called, well, she must have been disappointed, for it had no such effect. It frightened and in a sense humbled me, that is all, for I felt myself to be in the presence of something that was not human, something alien to me as a man, which I could fear and even adore as humanity would adore what is divine, but with which I had no desire to mix. Moreover, was it divine, or was it something very different? I did not know—I only knew that it was not for me; as soon should I have thought of asking for a star to set within my lantern.

I think that she felt this, felt that her stroke was missed, as the French say, that is, if she meant to strike at all at this moment, of which I am not certain, for it was in a changed voice, one with a suspicion of chill in it, that she said with a little laugh,

"Do you admit now, O Allan, that a

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woman may be old and still remain fair and unwrinkled ? ”

“ I admit,” I answered, although I was trembling so much that I could hardly speak with steadiness, “ that a woman may be splendid and lovely beyond anything that the mind of man can conceive, whatever her age, of which I know nothing, and I would add this, O Ayesha, that I thank you very much for having revealed to me the glory that is hid beneath your veil.”

“ Why ? ” she asked, and I thought that I detected curiosity in her question.

“ For this reason, O Ayesha. That now there is no fear of my troubling you in such a fashion as you seemed to dread a little while ago. As soon would a man desire to court the moon sailing in her silver loveliness through heaven.”

“ The moon ! It is strange that you should compare me to the moon,” she said musingly. “ Do you know that the moon was a great goddess in Old Egypt, and that her name was Isis, and—well, once I had to do with Isis ? Perhaps you were there and knew it, since more lives than one are given to most of us. I must search and learn. For the rest, all have not thought as you do, Allan. Many, on the contrary, love and seek to win the Divine.”

“ So do I at a distance, O Ayesha, but to come too near to it I will not presume, knowing that I might be consumed.”

“ You have wisdom,” she replied, not without admiration. “ The moths are few that fear the flame, but those are the moths which live. Why do you come to me, and what do you seek of me, O Allan, Watcher-in-the-Night ? Say it truthfully, for though I may laugh at lies and pass them by when they have to do with the eternal swordplay which Nature decrees between man and woman, until they break apart or, casting down the swords, seek arms in which they agree too well, when they have to do with policy and high purpose and ambition's ends, why then I avenge them upon the liar.”

Now I hesitated, as what I had to tell her seemed so foolish, indeed so insane, while she waited patiently as though to give me time to shape my thoughts. Speaking at last because I must, I said,

“ I come to ask you, O Ayesha, to show me the dead, if the dead still live elsewhere.”

“ And who told you, O Allan, that I could show you the dead, if they are not truly dead ? There is but one, I think, and if you are his messenger, show me his token, for without it we do not speak together of this business.”

“ What token ? ” I asked innocently, though I guessed her meaning well enough.

She searched me with her great eyes, for I felt, and indeed saw them on me through the veil, then answered,

“ I think—nay, let me be sure,” and half-rising from the couch, she bent her head over a tripod at her side, and stared into what seemed to be a bowl of crystal. If I read aright,” she said, straightening herself presently, “ it is a hideous thing enough, the carving of an abortion of a man such as no woman would care to look on lest her babe should bear its stamp; a charmed thing also that has virtue for him who wears it, especially for you, O Allan, since something tells me that it is dyed with the blood of one who loved you. If you have it, let it be revealed, since without it I do not talk with you of your dead.”

Now I drew the talisman from its hiding-place and held it towards her,

“ Give it me,” she said.

I was about to obey, when something seemed to warn me not to do so.

“ Nay,” I answered, “ he who lent me this carving for a while, charged me that, except in emergency to save others, I must wear it night and day until I returned it to his hand, saying that if I parted from it, fortune would desert me. I did not believe, and tried to be rid of it, whereon death drew near to me from a snake, such a snake as I see you wear about you, which doubtless has poison in its fangs, if of another sort. O Ayesha.”

“ Draw near,” she said, “ and let me look. ” Man, be not afraid.”

So I rose from my chair and knelt before her, hoping secretly that no one would see me in that ridiculous position which the most unsuspecting might misinterpret. I admit, however, that it proved to have compensations, since even through the veil I saw her marvellous eyes better than I

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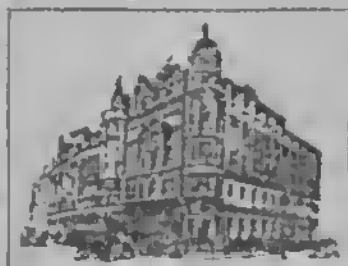
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had done before, and something of the pure outline of her classic face, also the fragrance of her hair was wonderful.

She took the talisman in her hand and examined it closely.

"I have heard of this charm, and it is true that the thing has power," she said, "for I can feel it running through my veins, also that it is a shield of defence to him who wears it. Yes, and now I understand what perplexed me somewhat, namely, how it came about that when you vexed me into unveiling—but let that matter be. The wisdom was not your own, but another's, that is all. Yes, the wisdom of one whose years have borne him beyond the shafts that fly from woman's eyes, the ruinous shafts that bring men to doom and nothingness. Tell me, Allan, is this the likeness of him who gave it you?"

"Yes, O Ayesha, the very picture, as I think, carved by himself, though he said that it is ancient, and others tell that it has been known in the land for centuries."

"So, perchance, has he," she answered drily, "since some of our company live long. Now tell me this wizard's name. Nay, wait awhile, for I would prove that indeed you are his messenger with whom I may talk about the dead, and other things, O Allan. You can read Arabic, can you not?"

"A little," I answered.

Then from a stool at her side she took paper, or rather papyrus, and a reed pen, and on her knee wrote something on the sheet which she gave to me folded up.

"Now tell me the names," she said, "and then let us see if they tally with what I have written, for, if so, you are a true man, not a wanderer or spy."

"The principal names of this doctor are Zikali, the Opener of Roads, the 'Thing-that-should-never-have-been-born!'" I answered,

"Read the writing, Allan."

I unfolded the sheet and read Arabic words which meant "Weapons; Cleaver of Rocks; One at whom dogs bark and children wail."

"The last two are near enough," she said, "but the first is wrong."

"Nay, Ayesha, since in this man's tongue Zikali means 'Weapons,' "intelligence at which she clapped her hands as a merry girl might do. "The man," I went on, "is without doubt a great doctor, one who sees and knows things that others cannot, but I do not understand why this token carved in his likeness should have power, as you say it has."

"Because with it goes his spirit, O Allan. Have you never heard of the Egyptians, a very wise people, who, as I remember, declared that man has a *Ka*, or Double, a second self, that can dwell in their statues or be sent far away?"

I answered that I had heard this.

"Well, the *Ka* of this Zikali goes with that hideous image of him, which is perhaps why you have come safe through many dangers, and why I seemed to dream so much of him last night also. Say now, what does Zikali want of me whose power he knows very well?"

"An oracle, the answer to a riddle, O Ayesha."

"Then set it out another time. So you desire to see the dead, and this old dwarf, who is a home of wisdom, desires an oracle from one who is greater than he. Good. And what are you, or both of you, prepared to pay for these boons? Know, Allan, that I am a merchant who sell my favours dear. Tell me, then, will you pay?"

"I think that it depends upon the price," I answered cautiously. "Set out the price, O Ayesha."

To be continued in the next number of "Hutchinson's Story Magazine"

How I improved my memory in one evening!

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I can hardly believe that it is only six short months since I first met David M. Roth, the famous memory expert, and learned from his course—in one evening—how to make my memory do wonderful things, which I never dreamed was possible.

That meeting, which has meant so much to me since, was at a luncheon of the Rotary Club, where Mr. Roth gave one of his remarkable memory demonstrations. I can best describe it by quoting a paper account of a similar exhibition:

"Of the 550 members of the Rotary Club at a luncheon yesterday not one left with the slightest doubt that Mr. Roth did it all claimed for him."

Mr. Roth started by asking sixty of those present to introduce themselves by name to him. Then he waved them away and requested a member at the blackboard to write down names of firms, sentences, and mottoes on numbered papers, meanwhile sitting with his back to the writer and learning the positions by oral report. After this he was asked by different members to tell what was written down in various specific queries, and gave the entire list without a falter.

Mr. Roth then singled out and called by name the sixty persons to whom he had been introduced, who in the meantime had changed seats and had mixed with others present."

It was just such a meeting that I attended when Mr. Roth was on the "Road to Better Memory."

My progress in memory building since that time seems like a dream. I can now go into a room with from 30 to 100 people, and one hour from being introduced to them—or work for a month—recall their names instantly wherever or whenever unexpectedly I may meet them again.

I find I am not the only one who has had this strange unbelievable experience.

Yesterday I was sitting at the desk of Mr. Roth's business, discussing some of the finer points in Mr. Roth's course with him. He brought out numbers with names and business facts, and showed a letter from Mr. H. Q. Smith, manager of the Graph Company. He says:—

"Here is the whole thing in a nutshell: Mr. Roth has a remarkable Memory Course. It is simple, and easy to follow, and a big. Yet with one hour a day of practice I can—I don't care who he is—can improve his Memory and have a good Memory in six months."

He then said, "I am not the only one who has had this strange unbelievable experience."

They tell in glowing terms what the Roth method does for them, in many ways, and how quickly and definitely they have mastered the big idea.

A card composite of the general type of these letters is enclosed several months ago from C. Louis Allen, who at the time was in the office of the Pitts Manufacturing Company, the famous tire manufacturer. He says:

"Now that the Roth Memory Course is finished, I want to say how much I have enjoyed the study of this most interesting subject. Usually these courses involve a great deal of memory, but this has been nothing but pure pleasure in the way through. I have derived much benefit from the course of instruction and feel that I shall be able to strengthen my memory. That is the last part of the course."

I am glad of an opportunity to recommend your course to my friends.

"I tell you, Mr. Jones, it is a great experience to read letters that pour in every day from every corner of the land—especially when I think how simple this method is and how few people among those who need it so badly have imagined before that such a thing could exist."

The Roth Course sent me ahead in my business to a degree that I would not have believed possible. And all in six months!

I know it was the Roth Course that did it, because I cannot account for the change in my whole business life in any other way.

The cold fact is that my new grip on business came in the six short months from the time I took up the Roth Memory Course.

In that brief period—and my cashier will vouch for this—I increased my sales by £20,000—and this in war-time, when huge holes were being made in business confidence and buying habits.

The reason stands out prominently. Mr. Roth has given me a firmer mental grasp of business tendencies, a better balanced judgment, a keener foresight and the ability to act swiftly and surely that I never possessed before.

His lessons have taught me to see clearly ahead, and how to visualise conditions in more exact perspective, and how to remember things the instant I need them most in business transactions.

In consequence, I have been able to seize many golden opportunities that before would have slipped by and been out of reach by the time I woke up.

You see the Roth Course has done vastly more for me than teaching me how to remember names and faces and telephone numbers. It has done more than make me a more interesting talker. It has done more than give me confidence in my feet.

It has given me a greater power in all the conduct of my business.

Mr. Roth's course has endowed me with a new business perspective. It has made me a keener observer. It has given me a new sense of proportion and values. It has given me visualisation, which, after all, is the true basis of business success.

Do you not think you can use this Roth Memory Course in your business? It doesn't cost a penny to try it out. And you will vote that you, (which I know you will send eventually) the best investment you ever made.

VICTOR JONES

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Judging Character at Sight

How to sum people up from their Looks

Little Signs that Reveal Character at a Glance—
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ONE evening a few months ago I happened to be in my club after dinner; whom should I run into but my old friend John Cogan.

Our talk gradually veered round to business, but no ordinary "shop talk"—I soon found myself getting a new point of view on meeting and dealing with others.

John Cogan is called practical. He is a thoroughgoing business man, and always a good salesman. So he took me somewhat by surprise when he told me—apropos of a big deal that he had just put through—that in the last few months he had learned more about getting on with people and about selling than in all his previous years of experience.

I asked him how. "By learning how to 'read' people—from their faces, from their outward appearance; how to look into and through them, instead of merely at them," was his answer.

"What I have learned about judging people," John continued, "has already added 25 per cent. to my sales, and you know I've always done fairly well. I can win men round now that I used to fail with, simply because I can size them up at sight and tell just how to get at them—whether to start right away with business or open up in a roundabout way, what their weak points are, what kind of talk will make the best appeal to each one, and what facts or arguments will

move him. It is all as clear as a book when you know the simple alphabet of signs that spell out a man's character and his mental traits—an alphabet that is surprisingly easy to learn.

"From a strictly business standpoint," John went on, "I consider this knack of judging people at sight about the biggest thing I ever picked up in my life. And yet learning it was a matter of only a few spare half-hours while smoking my after-dinner cigar.

"Maybe you've heard of Dr. K. M. H. Blackford, who for years has made a business of analysing character from appearances. One of the big agricultural implement companies paid Dr. Blackford a record salary for choosing employees—because of Dr. Blackford's ability to tell from an applicant's looks whether he had the stuff to make good, and what kind of a job he would fit into best. Instead of being guided by an applicant's record, or experience, or references, Dr. Blackford judged his good points and bad points, his ability and dependability, entirely from what she could see of him while taking his application. Other big firms have also paid her big fees for doing similar work.

"I had read and heard enough about Dr. Blackford's work," he continued, "to convince me that this was something I wanted to learn. I made careful inquiries. I found that this individual had taught the knack of judging to

thousands of men and women—from ambitious clerks up to the managers of large companies."

I have known John Cogan for years. He isn't a man who lets mere enthusiasm run away with him. Results are the only things that count with him. But there was one point I didn't get—how so busy a man as John Cogan had found time to take lessons from Dr. Blackford or anyone else.

"Nothing of the sort," he exclaimed when I asked him. "Dr. Blackford has arranged the whole thing into seven simple, quick, and easy lessons in printed form—a sort of pocket course for busy people, one that they can read and study after dinner at home, in the train, or at any other time or place. The lessons are so simple and interesting that they are more like a pastime than a study. My first evening on those lessons was a real pleasure. And the practical results began to show immediately—that first evening gave me pointers that I began to find useful the very next day. The rest was merely a matter of a little more practice."

I took John Cogan's suggestion and wrote for the lessons. That was about three months ago. Now I've learned the knack of reading people from the outward signs—of telling what a man or woman is like from what they look like.

He didn't paint it a bit too strong—either the simplicity of it, or the practical everyday value of knowing how to judge people, instead of relying on mere haphazard impressions about them. Thanks to those seven easy lessons, I can now tell almost the minute I lay eyes on people how to make them my friends, in either a business or social way—how to talk to them, how to influence them to the best advantage. Also I can tell at a glance whom I can trust and whom I can't. The first time I see a man—or woman either—I know more about

him than many of his friends do after years of acquaintance. On top of all this, those lessons have taught me more about myself than I ever knew before—and when you come right down to it, mighty few of us ever really know ourselves, to say nothing of others. To my mind, those two points are two of the biggest factors in any kind of work or business—knowing yourself and knowing others. No wonder Mr. L. E. Hawley wrote as follows:—

"If I had known years ago what I have learned already from Dr. Blackford's Course, the knowledge would have been worth a thousand times the price of these lessons to me."

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Next to the ability to read and write, I can't think of anything more practical and useful to any man or woman than this easily-acquired ability to "read" others. From selling all kinds of goods to addressing a jury or winning over a Board of Directors, from choosing friends to keeping them—in any kind of contact with others, social or business—the ability to judge people at a glance is a tremendous advantage; while the lack of it is a tremendous handicap.

That's why I say that what you get from Dr. Blackford's seven-lesson Course in Character is certainly worth many times 30s. to anyone who will send for it and read it.

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